

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: Gilbert's Restaurant

Other names/site number: VDHR ID 187-5005

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: 401 - 405 N. Main Street

City or town: Chatham State: VA County: Pittsylvania

Not For Publication:  Vicinity: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  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 at the following level(s) of significance:

national  statewide  local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A  B  C  D

<p>_____  <b>Signature of certifying official/Title:</b>  <u>Virginia Department of Historic Resources</u>  <b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b></p>	<p>_____  <b>Date</b></p>
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<p>In my opinion, the property <input type="checkbox"/> meets <input type="checkbox"/> does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<p>_____  <b>Signature of commenting official:</b></p>	<p>_____  <b>Date</b></p>
<p>_____  <b>Title :</b></p>	<p><b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b></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:) \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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#### 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

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**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC: hotel

DOMESTIC: multiple dwelling

COMMERCE/TRADE: restaurant

COMMERCE/TRADE: specialty store

DOMESTIC: single dwelling

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

DOMESTIC: single dwelling

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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE 19<sup>th</sup> AND EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY AMERICAN MOVEMENTS: Commercial Style

LATE 19<sup>th</sup> AND EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY AMERICAN MOVEMENTS:

Bungalow/Craftsman

**Materials:** (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property:

Foundation: CONCRETE

Walls: CONCRETE

Roof: ASPHALT, METAL: Tin

Other: STEEL, BRICK, WOOD, GLASS, SYNTHETICS: Vinyl

### 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.)

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### Summary Paragraph

Located at a mostly residential area of N. Main Street (US Route 29) and Lynn Street in North Chatham, the Gilbert's Restaurant building sits on a 0.95-acre plot and is a simple two-story Commercial Style building. Built ca. 1945 by the Reverend Robert Gregory Gilbert as a gas station, grocery and general store, tourist home, and café serving Black citizens, the building is constructed of painted cinderblock walls with a concrete slab base and a sloping flat roof. The four-bay facade features an off-center glass and aluminum storefront entrance flanked by three four-light fixed windows with wooden frames. The front of the building features a canopy supported by round metal posts. There is also a side entrance on the northern elevation with a gabled overhang supported by simple wooden posts. The side entrance has a flush metal door with a window in the door panel. The second story features 6/6 double-hung wood sash windows. The side and rear elevations of the second story are sheathed in weatherboard siding. A concrete and gravel lot surrounds the building. Gilbert's Restaurant is in fair condition and has had only slight alteration since its construction around 1945. About ten feet to the north of the restaurant building is a secondary building, a house designed in the Craftsman Style. It is the family home of Bob and Sandra Gilbert, who own the Gilbert's Restaurant building. The landscape features are minimal as the building has been used for storage since 1999.

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## Narrative Description

Built ca. 1945 by the Rev. Robert Gregory Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant served as a local landmark for the Black community and travelers in Chatham and Pittsylvania County through the years of legally sanctioned and de facto racial segregation. The building had various uses as a gas station, restaurant, grocery, general store, apartments, and tourist home until 1971 when Robert Gilbert's son, Bob Gilbert, and his wife Sandra Gilbert purchased the business and ran it primarily as a restaurant until 1999. Since 1999, the building has been used for storage.

### *Setting*

The former restaurant is located at the northern corner of Chatham, Virginia's North Main and Lynn Streets about half a mile north of downtown. The surrounding area is made up of homes with some community buildings and gas stations that briefly interrupt the mostly residential feel. The building is surrounded by a gravel lot with curb cuts on N. Main and Lynn streets for cars to turn into the lot. There are no sidewalks. The family home of the Gilberts sits just north of Gilbert's Restaurant. The landscape features are minimal.

### *Gilbert's Restaurant, 401 N. Main Street (Primary Resource, Contributing Building)*

Located at the corner of N. Main Street (US Route 29) and Lynn Street in North Chatham, the simple two-story building is constructed of painted cinder block on a concrete slab foundation with a sloping flat roof. The four-bay facade features an off-center glass and aluminum storefront entrance flanked by three two-over-two fixed wood windows. The front of the building features a canopy supported by metal posts. There is also a side entrance on the northern elevation with a pedimented overhang supported by simple wood balustrades. The side entrance door is a flush wood door with a window set into the door panel flush with the surrounding surface of the door. The second floor features six-over-six, double-hung wood sash windows. The side and rear elevations of the second story are sheathed in wood siding. A concrete and gravel lot surrounds the building, where the 1950s gas pumps were removed in the 1970s. In front of the building there also once was a large sign—now long gone—that read “Gilbert's for Colored,” signaling to Black passersby that they would be welcome unlike at the many white establishments that unfairly excluded them.<sup>1</sup>

The interior plan of the first floor consists of a front entrance vestibule opening into a restaurant space complete with an extant lunch counter fixture, intact dining booths, and free seating in the front and back along the western and northern interior, toilets and a kitchen with kitchen equipment at the rear eastern interior and office space behind the lunch counter towards the southern side. Interior finishes consist of vinyl tile flooring, wood-paneled walls and a dropped ACT ceiling. The interior spaces from the entrance vestibule to the back office and the kitchen feature unique flattened Tudor Arched openings framed with wood surrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. (Bob) Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview, interview by Elsabe C. (Ina) Dixon, June 25, 2024.

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The second story, accessed via exterior stairs at the back elevation features two one-bedroom apartments. These apartments consist of a living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. The rear (east) apartment area's floor is in disrepair and is unsafe to walk on, so the finishes and layout have been estimated based on examination of front (west) apartment finishes and interviews with the property owner, Bob Gilbert. The apartment finishes are vinyl ACT flooring in the kitchens, tile in the bathrooms and a mixture of wood flooring and carpet in the living and bedrooms. The walls of the apartments are mostly painted with the living rooms sheathed with wood paneling. The doors are flush single panel doors with simple wood trim.

There is a small 1983 addition to the building's southern elevation that extended a back-office space but does not overshadow the original massing of the building. Although vacant for many years and in need of maintenance, the building remains in stable condition and the owner has plans for its future stabilization. The building is well known for its appearance and considered a landmark for Black history in Chatham.

### ***Gilbert Family Home, 405 N. Main Street (Secondary Resource, Contributing Building)***

A secondary resource, the family home of the Gilberts, stands at 405 N. Main Street, adjacent to the restaurant. Built by Rev. Gilbert around the same time as the restaurant in 1945, this two-story dwelling with an end-gable porch is in good condition and of similar cinder-block construction, resting on a concrete foundation with a hipped roof sheathed in asphalt shingles. The dwelling shows features of both the American Foursquare and Craftsman styles. There is a small ca. 1983 addition on the building's northern elevation that is covered with a hipped roof with asphalt shingles and the exterior sheathed in aluminum siding. The Gilbert family has continually resided in this dwelling since 1945, first Rev. Robert and Arzelia Gilbert and later their son, Robert (Bob) Gilbert and his wife Sandra (Sandy), who have called 405 N. Main Street home since the 1980s.

### ***Statement of Integrity***

Gilbert's Restaurant retains its integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. Gilbert's Restaurant retains integrity of location and setting as it continues to occupy its original site at 401 N. Main Street with the Gilbert family home just north of the restaurant at 405 N. Main Street. Gilbert's Restaurant is surrounded by the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century residential and commercial and civic properties in the North Chatham neighborhood, which is not a designated historic district or included in the Chatham Historic District (VDHR ID #187-5001; NRHP 2001, NRIS 01000698). A rare example of a Black-built restaurant in the area, Gilbert's is not directly comparable with similar properties due to a lack of sufficiently intact examples in the area and given that most other restaurants in Chatham were in the downtown area, which was owned and controlled mainly by White property owners. Gilbert's retains its design, materials, and workmanship as evident in its simple form and in such details as its original concrete block construction, sloping flat roof, fixed windows, simple canopy with metal posts, and several aspects of its interior finishes, such as unique

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flattened Tudor Arched openings framed with wood surrounds in primary spaces of the restaurant. While the interior of the restaurant has had slight alterations over the years to accommodate its various uses in its evolution from a multi-purpose commercial center to mainly a restaurant, the primary spaces remain intact, as well as the floor and ceiling finishes, some fixtures such as dining booths and counters and the building continue to convey its function and design as a World War II era Commercial Style building. The modesty of its construction belies its eminence as a landmark to Black entrepreneurship that created a haven for civic engagement and civil rights efforts in rural Southside Virginia. The former restaurant building retains integrity of feeling and association as a Black-owned and operated local business. This one-stop general store, café, gas station, and tourist home was frequently a haven for efforts for organized resistance against segregation and racial discrimination, though original identifying signage from the days of Jim Crow and some original features, such as the gas tanks in the front of the building, have been removed. The building has been vacant since 1999 and, as a result, is in fair condition especially regarding the interior. Some areas, such as the second floor that was formerly used for apartments, have a poor appearance because of damage from weather and being consistently unoccupied for several decades. However, condition and appearance are separate qualifications, distinct from integrity. Despite the current fair condition and appearance of the Gilbert's Restaurant building, its integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association remain evident, and it is a well-known landmark in Chatham for its significance to local Black history.

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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



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**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ETHNIC HERITAGE: BLACK

COMMERCE

**Period of Significance**

Ca. 1945–1974

**Significant Dates**

Ca. 1945

1971

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Gilbert, Reverend Robert Gregory (builder)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**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.)

Built in a time of social change in the post-World War II years, the Commercial Style Gilbert's Restaurant building in Chatham, Virginia is nominated for listing in the National Register under Criterion A with significance on the local level in the areas of Commerce and Black Ethnic Heritage. The Restaurant was a haven and a harbor for Black entrepreneurship, women's economic freedom, civil rights, and racial justice. The history of Gilbert's Restaurant is emblematic of Black entrepreneurs across the American South who sought to unroot the "separate but equal" justification of Jim Crow racial segregation. These entrepreneurs, like the Reverend Robert Gregory Gilbert who built and ran Gilbert's beginning ca. 1945 until 1971, created welcoming spaces for both Black and White customers to enjoy and gather in a time of apartheid and racial discrimination in the South. The business thrived as it was a one-stop shop for Black men and women who otherwise had doors closed to them in a racially segregated South. It was a restaurant and tourist home where everyone from Black teachers to famous musicians and entertainers could stay and feel welcome. It was a place where strong Black women, through cooking the dishes Gilbert's became known for—pinto beans, fried chicken, various pies, and homemade lemonade—found financial independence even during Jim Crow. For decades, Gilbert's Restaurant was a refuge from a cruel legal and social system that did not recognize equality under the law, and it was home to many of the meetings and gatherings of civil rights organizations and NAACP attorneys that changed this country by dismantling segregation. As a landmark of Black business and success, Gilbert's Restaurant is key to understanding a broader narrative of how Black commerce undergirded the fight for civil rights and the ultimate demolition of Jim Crow segregation in Pittsylvania County and within the larger context of southside Virginia. The period of significance for the property begins circa 1945, with the initial construction of Gilbert's Restaurant, followed by the 1971 change in ownership and use as primarily a restaurant, and ends in 1974, the fifty-year cut off for eligible historic properties.

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

### *Historical Background*

The man who built what would become Gilbert's Restaurant at 401 N. Main Street in the small 1200-person town of Chatham, Virginia was a Black man, entrepreneur and pastor, the Reverend Robert Gregory Gilbert. Rev. Gilbert was born at the cusp of Jim Crow on October 16, 1895, in Pittsylvania County, Virginia.<sup>2</sup> Jim Crow, or the system of de jure segregation, imprisoned America under a discriminatory regime that kept races separate in public accommodations and

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "1900 Census of Population and Housing: Pittsylvania County, Chatham District. Sheet No. 11A," June 19, 1900, Ancestry.com; "Rev. Robert Gilbert," *Danville Register & Bee*, December 11, 1980, sec. 28, Newspapers.com.

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beyond from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-twentieth century. The world Rev. Gilbert was born into was one retreating from the promises of Reconstruction era civil rights legislation that had presumably established freedom, equality under the law, and voting rights for men in the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments. The promised integration after the end of Black enslavement in the South barely came to fruition. What instead grew over the following decades was racial prejudice, segregation, and the repeal of rights for Black citizens. Despite being born in such a time, Rev. Gilbert did not become a product of his time. The former restaurant and tourist home he built and founded became his vehicle for harboring the early forces in Virginia that would come to dismantle the institution of Jim Crow, securing equality under the law for all Americans, Black and White.

Rev. Gilbert was born not long after a Chatham legal case showcased the world of inequality that was to become the Jim Crow South. In 1880, the Supreme Court decision in *Ex Parte Virginia* involved the Pittsylvania County judge James D. Coles, who was indicted in a U.S. district court for violating the federal Civil Rights Act of 1875 by excluding Black men from juries. Though the Supreme Court confirmed in their decision in *Ex Parte Virginia* that the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment guaranteed equal protection under the law and required that states include Black men on juries, the case showed the difficulty of undoing the past racial hierarchy that slavery had created, especially in rural southern places like Chatham, Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning a year after Rev. Gilbert's birth, the Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* reversed the effort to secure Black rights. In 1896, the Supreme Court mandated separate but equal accommodations for Black and White people in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, paving the way for Jim Crow laws that established the inherently contradictory conclusion that Black and White Americans could only coexist if they were kept in separate spheres. In southern states like Virginia, businesses and governments quickly created new laws and spaces that would keep Black and White people separate. Just four years after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, Virginia legislature passed the state's first statute requiring the railroads to furnish separate or partitioned cars to accommodate different races.<sup>4</sup> Virginia would later showcase its commitment to racial segregation through legislation on separating races in schools, hospitals, businesses, and even prisons.<sup>5</sup>

Across Southern states like Virginia, Black men and women adapted to the new curtailed freedoms, establishing their own neighborhoods, schools, businesses.<sup>6</sup> Entire worlds, like the

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<sup>3</sup> Brent Tarter, "Ex Parte Virginia (1880)," in *Encyclopedia Virginia* (Virginia Humanities), accessed October 1, 2024, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/ex-parte-virginia-1880/>; Herman Melton, *Pittsylvania's Historic Courthouse: The Story behind Ex Parte Virginia and the Making of a National Landmark* (Chatham, Virginia: Herman Melton, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Charles E. Wynes, "The Evolution of Jim Crow Laws in Twentieth Century Virginia," *Phylon* (1960-) 28, no. 4 (34 1967): 417, <https://doi.org/10.2307/274293>.

<sup>5</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, Commemorative ed (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Wynes, "The Evolution of Jim Crow Laws in Twentieth Century Virginia."

<sup>6</sup> Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Christopher Silver, "The Racial Origins of Zoning: Southern Cities from 1910-40," *Planning Perspectives* 6, no. 2 (May 1991): 189-205,

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Holbrook-Ross neighborhood in Danville, Virginia, about 20 miles south of Chatham, were created that were free from White discrimination.<sup>7</sup> To help Black travelers navigate these separate spheres in America, *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was first published in 1936.<sup>8</sup> Printed each year until 1966, the *Green Book*, as it became known, listed addresses of businesses, gas stations, tourist homes, and restaurants that would welcome Black customers, keeping Black travelers from “running into difficulties” and “embarrassments” that they may otherwise find in a racially discriminatory American landscape without help from the guide.<sup>9</sup> With the aid of the *Green Book*, driving in the Jim Crow South became a way for Black men and women to find freedom and joy in the face of oppression and discrimination.<sup>10</sup>

Though presumably equal in theory, the mandate of separate but equal established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* never played out in practice. Indeed, Jim Crow laws in the South paved the way for increasing inequality in education, commerce, and in the justice system. This inequality would pave a path for the institution’s demise beginning in the 1940s. After pressure from Black leadership in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to end racial discrimination in federal hiring practices, in 1941 as the United States prepared to potentially enter World War II, then-president Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law Executive Order 8802. This Presidential directive, the first since Reconstruction to confront racial discrimination, banned “discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries and in Government, because of race, creed, color, or national origin.”<sup>11</sup> This was the first hit to tolerance of Jim Crow in America.

Bolstered by this federal action and with the United States involvement in World War II beginning in 1941, the accommodation by Virginia’s Black leaders of Jim Crow’s claim of “separate but equal” began to dissolve. In the fall of 1942, a group of Black leaders in Virginia came together at Virginia Union University to “formulate a statement setting forth what they wanted in the postwar South.”<sup>12</sup> Gordon Hancock, a professor at Virginia Union and a leader for civil rights, led the conference, which resulted in a draft of the Articles of Cooperation. Rather than continue in the accommodationist route that had been previous leaderships’ strategy (most famously heralded by Virginia-born Booker T. Washington in the early twentieth century), the Articles of Cooperation redirected Southern Black leadership. With Hancock’s guidance, the

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/02665439108725726>; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, 1st ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Alison Stone Blanton, “108-0180 Holbrook-Ross Street Historic District,” 1997, <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/108-0180/>.

<sup>8</sup> Candacy Taylor, *Overground Railroad: The Green Book and the Roots of Black Travel in America* (New York: Abrams Press, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> *The Negro Motorist Green Book: 1950*, 1, accessed October 1, 2024, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/283a7180-87c6-0132-13e6-58d385a7b928>.

<sup>10</sup> For more analysis of the link between driving as a tool for Black equality and as an impetus for the civil rights movement, see Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, *Driving While Black: African American Travel and the Road to Civil Rights*, Paperback edition (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> “Executive Order 8802: Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry (1941),” June 25, 1941, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-8802>.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Marvin T. Chiles, “A Period of Misunderstanding,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 129, no. 3 (2021): 262.

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Articles of Cooperation demanded nothing but “full racial equality” after the war.<sup>13</sup> Though these Articles of Cooperation did not change any laws, they signaled an entirely different direction in the fight for equal rights. The days of viewing segregation as a pervasive and unsolvable problem of the South were over.

**Criterion A: Commerce – *Gilbert's Restaurant as Landmark of Black Entrepreneurship***

It was in this climate of segregation and resistance that the Rev. Robert Gregory Gilbert and his wife Arzelia (née Craft) began Gilbert's Café & Grocery Store in 1939. This first iteration of Gilbert's Restaurant opened within a rented space at the Masonic Lodge at 364 North Main Street in Chatham and operated as a general store and café with farming goods, supplies, food, and even a small clothing line, for purchase to both Black and White customers.<sup>14</sup>

Gilbert's Café & Grocery Store was opened to shore up the economic prosperity of Black residents as well as create a space where both Black and White customers could frequent together despite being pushed apart by the broader world of segregated spaces in the Jim Crow South. In a world of Jim Crow where Black people were made to drink at separate water fountains, enter separate doors, use separate restrooms (or have none provided for them at all), Gilbert's Café & Grocery Store offered a realm where both Blacks and Whites could enter through a single door, peruse the same items for their farm or home, and support a local Black business.<sup>15</sup> The business became a quiet but radical space that planted the seed for change.

This space of equality was carried on when the store was expanded and brought to its final and most well-known location around 1945. The success of their store and café, as well as the desire to centralize other businesses they had, like a gas station down the street, motivated the Gilberts to sell their family farm to make the downpayment for land on which they could build a new family home and an expanded Gilbert's Restaurant. In the winter of 1944, Rev. Gilbert and his wife Arzelia purchased plots of land in North Chatham from two White farming families, Mary H. and J. Sam White, and Kate H. and D. Alvin Powell for \$1700, \$900 of which was borrowed through a mortgage with the White-owned Planters Bank & Trust Company in Chatham.<sup>16</sup> Adjusted for inflation, the amount the Gilbert's paid and mortgaged to make their new restaurant a reality was no small sum for a farming family—one just short of \$30,000 in today's dollars. These plots of land that occupied the 400 block of North Main Street became the site onto which

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<sup>13</sup> Regarding Booker T. Washington's political strategy for Black rights, see Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday; Bartleby.com, 1901), [www.bartleby.com/1004/](http://www.bartleby.com/1004/); Raymond Smock, ed., *Booker T. Washington in Perspective: Essays of Louis R. Harlan* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); Chiles, “A Period of Misunderstanding,” 263.

<sup>14</sup> Bob Gilbert, “Gilbert's Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society” (Pittsylvania County Historical Society Meeting, Chatham, Virginia, April 16, 2018), 1; Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview.

<sup>15</sup> Robert R. Weyeneth, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past,” *The Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (2005): 36–38, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2005.27.4.11>.

<sup>16</sup> “Pittsylvania County, Virginia Deed Records: Survey Map 1-253B,” November 16, 1944; “Pittsylvania County, Virginia Deed Records by and between Mary H. White and J. Same White, Kate H. Powell and D.A. Powell and Arzelia Gilbert: Book 264, Page 547-9,” December 14, 1944.

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Rev. Gilbert would quickly build his family's home and a new, expanded general store and restaurant.<sup>17</sup>

This new Gilbert's Café and Restaurant opened sometime around 1945 at the 401 N. Main Street location.<sup>18</sup> Planned and constructed by Rev. Gilbert himself, the humble cinderblock of its materials belied the celebrated haven it became for the community of Chatham.<sup>19</sup> Gilbert's Restaurant, as it eventually became known, served a variety of uses over its commercial lifetime. These uses included a gas station in the front of the building, a grocery and general store on the southern side, a beauty salon, a tourist home and apartments on the second floor, and a restaurant that occupied the majority of the first floor.

In front of the building there once was a large sign—now long gone—that read “Gilbert's For Colored.”<sup>20</sup> This sign was not to indicate that Whites were not welcome—for they were and did often frequent Gilbert's. However, in the age of Jim Crow, such signs, often hand-painted and large, were ubiquitous and mandatory signals to Black passersby where, and where not, they were welcome.<sup>21</sup> Unlike many White establishments, White and Black customers could, in addition to purchasing groceries and gas, bump elbows at the same counter and sit at the same booths where they enjoyed fried chicken, pinto beans, fried apple and lemon chess pies along with coffee, iced tea, and hand squeezed lemonade.<sup>22</sup> While offering a radical, integrated space that offered hospitality to a race excluded from much of the “White world” of Jim Crow, Gilbert's showcased a Black business that became treasured by all in the community, both Black and White.

Though Rev. Robert G. Gilbert was the catalyst for this enterprise that became Gilbert's Restaurant, Black women were often the day-to-day stewards of the business. Black restaurants and tourist homes in Jim Crow, as food historians have found, were “key to the informal economy in the Black South” and women were central to this economic vehicle.<sup>23</sup> Women like Rev. Robert G. Gilbert's wife, Arzelia, and other Black women who worked in the kitchen were the ones who created Southern cuisine and the experience for which Gilbert's was known. When customers went to Gilbert's, they knew they were eating good Southern cooking crafted by experienced cooks such as Arzelia and longtime cook Mary Hilda Reynolds Davis, both of

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<sup>17</sup> Pittsylvania County Chamber of Commerce, “Gilbert's Restaurant Is Business of Month,” *Danville Register & Bee*, July 17, 1985, sec. 15, Newspapers.com; Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview; Gilbert, “Gilbert's Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society.”

<sup>18</sup> Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview.

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert.

<sup>20</sup> Gilbert, “Gilbert's Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society,” 5.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Guffey, “Knowing Their Space: Signs of Jim Crow in the Segregated South,” *Design Issues/The MIT Press* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 41–60.

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview; Bill McKelway, “Lingering Doubt: Kennedy Case Not Closed Yet,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 9, 1986, sec. 5; Mitch McCullough, “Gilbert's: Chatham Grocery Also Serves Home Cooking,” *Danville Register & Bee*, May 20, 1986, sec. 7, Newspapers.com.

<sup>23</sup> John T. Edge, *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 23; See also Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

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whom worked at the restaurant for well over three decades.<sup>24</sup> When Robert (Bob) Gilbert, Rev. Robert G. Gilbert's son, took over the business beginning in 1971, his wife Sandra (Sandy) Gilbert was the steady partner whose hands and heart continued to make Gilbert's the beloved business it had been. In addition to the kitchen spaces, women also operated beauty parlors in the living spaces above the restaurant. In these spaces of hospitality and community like Gilbert's, Black women were provided with an income that was not dependent on White dollars alone, and they worked in a space that did not require them to conform to a White supervisor. At the core of Gilbert's, and establishments like this in the South, Black women cooked and housed with love and care for their customers. In so doing, they created a life of relative economic freedom for themselves, even under Jim Crow.

The women who made Gilbert's prosper relied on self-sustaining system of local foods from gardens and local farms, asserting another kind of independence through Southern food systems. Far before the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s encouraged community gardens and local produce, the Gilbert family expressed their individuality and power through "soul food" produced via the garden and animals they cultivated and owned.<sup>25</sup> Rev. Gilbert's son Bob remembered the first job he had as a young boy helping in the family business was raising and picking the vegetables from the family's garden that would be used in the restaurant. "Most of the vegetable's used [at Gilbert's]," Bob explained in a 2018 talk to the Pittsylvania County Historical Society, "were freshly picked from our garden or purchased from a local farmer."<sup>26</sup> In the early years of Gilbert's, the family took their farming routines and knowledge and brought it to the restaurant, getting fresh milk for butter from a cow they brought with them from the farm and cooking nearly everything on their menu from scratch. By relying locally on their own farming know-how and that of neighbor farmers, the Gilbert family created a menu of delicious local food such as butter milk, corn bread, pinto beans, and collard greens that contributed to their family's and community's thriving.

Gilbert's was not only a place of racial integration, Black economic freedom, and a sustainable economic hub for local food. It was also, importantly, a place of joy. Black customers could enjoy themselves not only with the home-cooked Southern cuisine, but also with the incredible hospitality and famous guests that Gilbert's became known for. Gilbert's was never listed in the official travel guide of the "Green Book" published between 1936 and 1966 for Black travelers, though it was a well-known stop for touring Black musicians and entertainers. Gilbert's was located on what was at that time U.S. 29, a major highway that linked Washington D.C. to the Carolinas. Interstates and local bypasses were either non-existent or in their infancy during the early 1950s and 1960s. Since Gilbert's put up advertising—a sign that read "Gilbert's for Colored"—three miles north of Chatham and one in front of the restaurant, the sign and the route of U.S. 29 made Gilbert's an easy stop for many Black entertainers during that time.<sup>27</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s the Singing Siamese Twins, Yvonne and Yvette McCarther, who were joined at the head, stayed and dined at Gilbert's. American singer and songwriter Fats Domino stopped in

<sup>24</sup> Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview; "Mary Davis," *Danville Register & Bee*, May 23, 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Edge, *The Potlikker Papers*, 70–72.

<sup>26</sup> Gilbert, "Gilbert's Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society," 6.

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert, Robert. Email Correspondence with Ina Dixon, November 16, 2024.

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to dazzle restaurant staff with his gemmed pinky ring and helped himself to several large portions of Arzelia Gilbert's pinto beans. A young James Earl Jones, then a stage actor, also stopped in to dine and stay during this time.<sup>28</sup> Despite never being officially listed in the *Green Book*—perhaps because Rev. Gilbert was politically sensitive to what White attitudes may have been to his listing in what has been described as an “overground railroad” of sorts in the segregated South—Gilbert's nevertheless became a known place to eat and stay for Black travelers.<sup>29</sup>

Over the years, Gilbert's became a beloved business, though it was not always run strictly for profit. Enterprising for a purpose, that of offering a space of welcome and hospitality to Black people in a Jim Crow South, Rev. Robert G. and Arzelia Gilbert often gave more than they received. Bob Gilbert, Robert G. and Arzelia Gilbert's son who eventually took over the business, could never figure out how the family stayed afloat in those early years. Bob recalled his mother giving what the then-teenage Bob thought of as “hobos” free meals at the restaurant. “I just thought it was wrong,” Bob related, only later in his adulthood realizing that his mother “was a jewel, she was an angel” by giving what their family had to those who had nothing.<sup>30</sup> Even in future years, some customers witnessed the same graciousness and kindness and questioned Gilbert's sustainability as an economic venture.

Rev. Robert G. Gilbert's economic ventures dovetailed with a commitment to community. Beginning in the late 1930s thru the early 1950s, Rev. Gilbert donned a different hat from storeowner and pastor, one that would allow him to truly construct the foundation for Pittsylvania County's strong and connected Black community. During this time, Rev. Gilbert built over eight properties that served his family and the Black community in Chatham. Besides building Gilbert's at 401 N. Main Street and the family home next door at 405 N. Main Street around 1945, Rev. Gilbert also built homes for other family members nearby at 409 N. Main Street and 439 Peach Street. In addition to these homes, he also constructed or helped remodel four area churches during these years including: Fairview Missionary Baptist Church at 3853 Zion Road in Gretna, Virginia, where Odell Waller's funeral was held; the Antioch Baptist Church at 341 Belair Road and Union Missionary Baptist Church at 3529 Brights Road, both in Gretna, Virginia; and Tarpley's Chapel Missionary Baptist Church at 16156 Mt. Cross Road in Dry Fork, Virginia.<sup>31</sup> Gilbert's Restaurant was one of many places, shaped by Rev. Gilbert, that themselves helped foster and support a strong Black community in Pittsylvania County.

Thanks to Rev. Robert G. Gilbert's vision and his renown in the community, Gilbert's Restaurant became a type of haven where Black people could meet, mingle, and stay without discrimination. It was a one-stop shop for Black and White people in the area, offering space

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<sup>28</sup> Gilbert, “Gilbert's Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society”; Associated Press, “Yvette McCarther, Yvonne McCarther: Siamese Twins, 43,” *New York Times*, January 6, 1993, sec. B, New York Times Machine; “Clipping: Chatham, Va Tourism Article,” *Virginian Pilot*, May 22, 1983, Pittsylvania County Public Library, History Research Center.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *Overground Railroad*.

<sup>30</sup> Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Gilbert, email correspondence with Ina Dixon, July 29, 2024. “Our History: Fairview Baptist Church History,” accessed October 15, 2024, <http://www.fairviewbaptistchurchgretna.org/our-church-2/our-history/>.



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where the lie of Jim Crow that races must be “separate but equal” did not have to be upheld. In this space, Black women stood central, crafting good, local food and providing the welcoming experience for which Gilbert’s was well known. Gilbert’s Restaurant was a beloved business, and through its economic engine it became a landmark, like many other of Rev. Gilbert’s projects, of Black entrepreneurship, Black women’s economic power, and a safe harbor from the rampant storm of racial discrimination in the time of Jim Crow.

**Criterion A: Black Ethnic Heritage** – *Gilbert’s Restaurant as a Convening Space for Civil Rights Efforts*

Built around 1945, Gilbert’s Restaurant served as a one-stop shop for Black residents and tourists who could stay, dine, get groceries, gas, and even their hair done without fear of discrimination or injury during Jim Crow segregation. The building’s modest construction belies its importance as a landmark of Chatham’s community and a monument to a state and national story of Black fortitude and goodwill amidst the racial segregation and exclusion of Jim Crow. Though Gilbert’s Restaurant is now closed, the building serves as a landmark of the way local, informal spaces nurtured the national movement for civil rights. Throughout its lifetime, from the 1940s through the even the 1990s, the Restaurant became not only known as a haven for the local community, but as something of a political convening space for those who fought against discrimination in all its forms.

It was no accident that Gilbert’s Restaurant became that convening space. Created by the Rev. Robert Gilbert, who pastored many Black families in the area, Gilbert’s was made to be a harbor for those fighting injustice. A case that highlights the role Gilbert’s played in supporting those whose rights the governmental infrastructure at the time refused to protect was a local trial that made national headlines: the 1940s Pittsylvania County trial and execution of Odell Waller.

Odell Waller was a Black sharecropper who lived and worked near Gretna and was well known to the Gilbert family. Before Rev. Robert Gregory Gilbert built and ran the restaurant and all-purpose store that came to be known as Gilbert’s Restaurant, the reverend was a farmer and a minister, mostly involved with Fairview Baptist Church in Gretna, Virginia.<sup>32</sup> Rev. Gilbert was a critical support for many, such as the Waller family, whom he pastored in the 1940s in Pittsylvania County.<sup>33</sup> In 1940, Odell Waller fatally shot his White landlord, an interracial crime that would soon gain national attention. Waller and his defense argued this shooting was in self-defense after the landlord refused to pay Waller’s mother her promised income, evicted the Waller family without justification, and withheld the Waller’s share of wheat that they had worked to grow and reap. Waller was tried and convicted by an all-White jury for this crime and sentenced to death.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “1940 Census of Population and Housing: Pittsylvania County, Chatham District. Sheet No. 8A,” April 15, 1940, Ancestry.com.

<sup>33</sup> Gilbert, “Gilbert’s Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society,” 9–11.

<sup>34</sup> Richard B. Sherman, *The Case of Odell Waller and Virginia Justice, 1940-1942*, 1st ed (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

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Across the United States, organizations rallied to commute this harsh sentence and protest the poll tax that had essentially created the racially biased all-White jury who convicted Waller—a jury that *Ex Parte Virginia* had ruled in 1880 was unconstitutional. Despite involvement by the Workers' Defense League, then-nascent civil rights activist Pauli Murray, and even first-lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Waller was executed in 1942.<sup>35</sup>

Odell Waller's funeral was held on July 5<sup>th</sup> of that year at Fairview Baptist Church, a church led by Rev. Gilbert and one he helped remodel. According to the local paper, over "2000 sympathizing friends" in addition to Waller's family were in attendance. These 2000-some guests heard as Rev. Gilbert gave the eulogy for the life of Odell Waller, a Black man forced into violence, convicted without a jury of his peers, and unjustly executed in the Jim Crow South.<sup>36</sup> Rev. Gilbert's role as pastor to those such as Waller paved the path for the 1945 building to become a haven for helping others whose rights were overlooked in the blindness of Jim Crow.

When Rev. Gilbert built what would become Gilbert's Restaurant around 1945, the building became a civil rights harbor very soon after it was built, accommodating those fighting yet another deplorable administration of justice: the Martinsville Seven case.<sup>37</sup> The Martinsville Seven case involved seven Black men accused of raping a White woman in 1949 in the nearby city of Martinsville. The White woman, thirty-two-year-old Ruby Stroud Floyd, had traveled into the Black section of Martinsville and alleged being raped by thirteen men. Of those alleged to have raped her, seven men were arrested, put on trial, and dealt swift individual trials that resulted in the juries, all White, finding all seven men guilty with the punishment of death. However awful the crime of rape was, in Virginia, the punishment of death for such a crime was clearly meted out in a discriminatory fashion. As the Danville defense lawyer Martin A. Martin argued in the Martinsville Seven case, in issuing a punishment of death, the juries had effectively denied the men's rights under the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Martin cited that forty-five black men and no white men had been executed for rape in Virginia since at least 1908, when the state took over executions from local jurisdictions.<sup>38</sup> The Martinsville Seven case proved Virginia's "policy, practice, custom, and usage of juries" to sentence Black men to death for rape of White women while "seldom if ever" was a White man, convicted of a similar crime, given the same punishment.<sup>39</sup>

The Martinsville Seven were executed in February 1951. In the trials and appeals of the case that occurred from 1949 through the devastating result in 1951, Gilbert's Restaurant welcomed those lawyers such as Martin A. Martin, a Danville lawyer who joined the Richmond law firm of the

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<sup>35</sup> Sherman; Pauli Murray, Oral History Interview with Pauli Murray: Interview G-0044, interview by Genna Rae McNeil, February 13, 1976, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, [https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0044/excerpts/excerpt\\_8640.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0044/excerpts/excerpt_8640.html).

<sup>36</sup> Mattie V. Grubbs, "Rites Held Sunday for Waller," *The Pittsylvania Tribune*, July 10, 1942.

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert, "Gilbert's Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society," 9–10; Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview.

<sup>38</sup> Eric W. Rise, *The Martinsville Seven: Race, Rape, and Capital Punishment* (Charlottesville ; London: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 120.

<sup>39</sup> Rise, 85.

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attorney and civil rights activist Oliver Hill, and Spottswood Robinson III.<sup>40</sup> These men, together along with other NAACP attorneys, sought to find justice for the Martinsville Seven. During the case, the attorneys' made a stop at Gilbert's, as Bob Gilbert remembers as a child, meeting around the tables at the restaurant, their discussions of the defense no doubt fueled by Arzelia's pinto beans, fried chicken, homemade lemonade, pies, and coffee.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the devastation of the Martinsville Seven's executions, the Virginian and national campaign for civil rights did not falter – in fact, it grew momentum following this loss. Thanks in part to havens like Gilbert's Restaurant, soon the NAACP and civil rights attorneys like Oliver Hill pushed full throttle for desegregation in public schools, especially in places like Prince Edward County, Virginia. In the Prince Edward County town of Farmville, a mere eighty miles from Chatham, Black students at the segregated Robert Russa Moton High School boycotted and protested for better educational facilities. The unflagging efforts of young high school students, NAACP lawyers, and many others directly resulted in the 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. *Brown v. Board* ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and effectively ended the "separate but equal" dogma underpinning Jim Crow since the 1896 decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.<sup>42</sup> The fight for civil rights often faltered, as it had in the both the Odell Waller and Martinsville Seven cases, yet with harbors like Gilbert's for those who would eventually break the doctrine of Jim Crow segregation, there was progress.

Further progress ensued in the following decades.<sup>43</sup> In July of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed in the law the Civil Rights Act, which effectively dismantled Jim Crow by prohibiting discrimination in public places, segregation in schools and other public facilities, and made employment discrimination illegal.<sup>44</sup> The following year the Voting Rights Act was ratified, which fulfilled the promise of the Reconstruction-era fifteenth amendment of the Constitution by securing a nationwide prohibition of the denial or abridgment of the right to vote on account of race or color.<sup>45</sup> In 1966, with Jim Crow waning, the *Green Book* issued its final guide for "Negro Travelers." Like many remnants of the past, the former Jim Crow signs like the one outside Gilbert's proclaiming "For Colored" lost their relevancy in a slowly integrating South. The very

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<sup>40</sup> Larissa Smith Ferguson, "Oliver W. Hill (1907–2007)," in *Encyclopedia Virginia* (Charlottesville, Virginia, n.d.), <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/hill-oliver-w-1907-2007/>.

<sup>41</sup> Gilbert, "Gilbert's Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society," 9–10.

<sup>42</sup> Ronald Heinemann, "Moton School Strike and Prince Edward County School Closings," in *Encyclopedia Virginia* (Charlottesville, Virginia, n.d.), <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/moton-school-strike-and-prince-edward-county-school-closings/>; Kristen Green, *Something Must Be Done About Prince Edward County: A Family, a Virginia Town, a Civil Rights Battle* (Harper Perennial, 2016). *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, Opinion; May 17, 1954; Records of the Supreme Court of the United States; Record Group 267; National Archives.

<sup>43</sup> Progress that came, of course, with some considerable stalls including many public schools across the commonwealth closed to all students in the years following the *Brown v. Board* decision, Bloody Monday in June of 1963 in Danville, when deputized city workers violently barraged peaceful civil rights protestors.

<sup>44</sup> Civil Rights Act of 1964; 7/2/1964; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789 - 2011; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

<sup>45</sup> Voting Rights Act, August 6, 1965; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives

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ubiquity of these signs under Jim Crow made them easy fixtures to simply throw away as the nation and the Gilbert family looked to a more racially just future.<sup>46</sup>

When Bob and his wife Sandy took over Gilbert's Restaurant and the tourist home in 1971, they soon realized that with the changing times they needed to change more than the "Gilbert's for Colored" sign: they needed to consider a new business model. The Gilbert's solid base of Black customers was no longer confined to Black establishments in this new era, as many places now were required by law to welcome both Black and White customers. Additionally, following the construction of a new Route 29 by-pass around Chatham around 1964, a new highway was routing both Black and White customers out of downtown.<sup>47</sup> With more places opening up to Black customers and fewer cars passing through town, Bob and Sandy slowly moved away from the hospitality business and focused mainly on the restaurant portion of the enterprise. When Rev. Robert G. Gilbert died in 1980, Bob and Sandy honored his memory by investing more time, energy, and money in the restaurant.<sup>48</sup> In 1983, Bob and Sandy made slight renovations to Gilbert's, adding on a small office addition to the southern elevation to create more room for restaurant space and removing the gas tanks that had once been a part of the multifaceted Black enterprise.<sup>49</sup> From that time on, Gilbert's operated solely as a restaurant, and a beloved one at that.

Gilbert's continued to be known in Chatham and the area for its good southern cooking, including Sandy's lemon chess, sweet potato, and fried apple pies, fried and boiled chitterlings, fried chicken, pinto beans, cornbread, and homemade lemonade and iced tea.<sup>50</sup> Under Bob and Sandy's ownership, Gilbert's also remained known for being a place supportive of civil rights and the convening of those who fought for these rights.<sup>51</sup> Civic groups like the local NAACP would often gather at the restaurant and, in 1983, many meetings were held at Gilbert's as Bob Gilbert himself led efforts to fight a discriminatory hire in the Pittsylvania County Public School System. That year, the County promoted George Haley, a White man, as principal of Chatham High School, over the current assistant principal, Walter R. Keys, a Black man with over 34 years of experience working in the county school system who was the obvious next hire. With a family background caring for civil rights and fighting discrimination, Bob led the Concerned Citizens Education Group to protest this hire. The Concerned Citizens Education Group partnered with the NAACP of Pittsylvania County to formally file a discrimination claim in November of 1983.<sup>52</sup> In 1984, the Federal Office of Civil Rights ultimately sided with the

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<sup>46</sup> Guffey, "Knowing Their Space: Signs of Jim Crow in the Segregated South," 42.

<sup>47</sup> "Bids Asked on Access Road, Bridges, Chatham By-Pass," *Danville Register & Bee*, January 11, 1963, sec. Second Section, Newspapers.com.

<sup>48</sup> "Rev. Robert Gilbert."

<sup>49</sup> Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview; Gilbert, "Gilbert's Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society," 12.

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview; McKelway, "Lingering Doubt: Kennedy Case Not Closed Yet"; McCullough, "Gilbert's: Chatham Grocery Also Serves Home Cooking."

<sup>51</sup> Gilbert, "Gilbert's Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society," 12.

<sup>52</sup> Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview; Heidi Flick, "Earl Johnson Refuses to Review Appointment," *Danville Register & Bee*, June 29, 1983, sec. B-1, Newspapers.com; Heidi Flick, "Complaint Allege County Discrimination," *Danville Register & Bee*, December 9, 1983, Newspapers.com.

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County and decided that the hire was not discriminatory.<sup>53</sup> Despite this setback, Bob and the restaurant continued the legacy of Rev. Gilbert in being a leader and running a haven for those fighting discrimination. Between 1989 and 1990 the NAACP, Voters League, Concerned Citizens (of which Bob was a leader), and the Virginia chapter of the ACLU, mobilized to draw a primary map for Pittsylvania County's first and only minority voting district. Bob rallied more than 300 citizens to turn out in support of the redistricting at a Pittsylvania Board of Supervisors meeting and he later held the redistrict drawing at Gilbert's over the years. This work to create a minority voting district led to the 1991 election of William Pritchett, who was the first Black Supervisor elected in the history of Pittsylvania County. Bob was among the five Black members who served on the Redistricting Committee that had helped Pritchett's win, showcasing once again the powerful civil rights legacy that he, his father, and the restaurant shared.<sup>54</sup>

The 1990s introduced several hurdles that made running the restaurant less feasible for Bob and Sandy. In 1990, Bob's mother and longtime cook at Gilbert's, Arzelia Gilbert, died. Three years later, a late-night murder in Pittsylvania County that involved two frequent Gilbert's Restaurant customers shook Bob and Sandy.<sup>55</sup> The Restaurant began closing earlier in the evenings and staff became harder to come by. In 1999, Bob and Sandy made the tough decision to close Gilbert's Restaurant that had once been a beacon for good food, civil rights, and racial justice that had impact far beyond the reach of the small town of Chatham.

### *Summary*

Since its ca. 1945 construction, Gilbert's was not simply a place where people once ate and stayed. The Restaurant was a haven and a harbor for Black entrepreneurship, civil rights, and racial justice. Built and founded by a Black man in a time of Jim Crow, the business thrived as a one-stop shop for Black men and women who otherwise had doors closed to them in a racially segregated South. It was where everyone from Black teachers to famous musicians and entertainers could stay and feel welcome. It was a place where Black women, through their cooking of local foods, could find financial stability and independence beyond a White world that refused to see their dignity. It was a refuge from a cruel legal system that did not recognize equality under the law, and it was home to many of the meetings and gatherings that changed this country. Gilbert's was not just a restaurant or tourist home, but a landmark of Black commerce and cultural significance.

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<sup>53</sup> "Civil Rights Office Says Schools Don't Discriminate," *Danville Register & Bee*, January 25, 1984, Newspapers.com.

<sup>54</sup> Gilbert, Robert. Email Correspondence with Ina Dixon, November 16, 2024. "Playing Hot Potato," *Danville Register & Bee*, January 19, 1989, Newspapers.com; Laura Bland, "County Redistricting Decision Draws Near," *The Bee*, March 16, 1989, sec. B, Newspapers.com; Bernard Baker, "Pritchett Triumph Historic," *Danville Register & Bee*, November 7, 1991, sec. A, Newspapers.com.

<sup>55</sup> "Arzelia C. Gilbert," *Danville Register & Bee*, June 8, 1990, sec. 2, Newspapers.com; Gilbert, Gilbert's Restaurant Interview; Laura Bland and Benson Benson, "Man Arrested After Double Murder," *Danville Register & Bee*, January 30, 1993, sec. 1.

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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: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** VDHR No. 187-5005

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### 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property** 0.19 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: 36.835710 | Longitude: -79.393455 |
| 2. Latitude:           | Longitude:            |
| 3. Latitude:           | Longitude:            |
| 4. Latitude:           | Longitude:            |

**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: |

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

The nominated parcel boundary corresponds to the lot lines of the property when the Gilbert's Restaurant and family home at 401 and 405 N Main Street in North Chatham (which sit on tax parcel IDs: 2426-14-4998 and 426-15-4075) were initially constructed ca. 1945. The property is bounded to the east by N. Main Street and to the south by Lynn Street adjacent to residential property at 409 N. Main Street. The true and correct historic boundary is shown on the attached Location Map and Sketch Map/ Photo Key.

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundaries include the Gilbert family home and the Gilbert's Restaurant that historically were documented in deed research and were constructed and owned by the Gilbert family beginning ca. 1945. Thus, the historic boundary encompasses all known historic resources as well as the surrounding land comprising the parcel.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: Ina Dixon, Manager  
organization: Storied Capital, LLC  
street & number: PO BOX 11634  
city or town: Danville state: Va zip code: 24543  
e-mail InaElsabe@gmail.com  
telephone: 703-470-1121  
date: 11/20/24

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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.)

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### 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

**Name of Property:** Gilbert's Restaurant

**City or Vicinity:** Chatham

**County:** Pittsylvania County

**State:** Virginia

**Photographer:** Ina Dixon, Blair Construction

**Date Photographed:** May, June, and September 2024

**Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:**

**1 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0001.jpg

**View:** Drone shot of Gilbert's Restaurant and Family Residence site at the corner of North Main and Lynn Streets, view from above looking east

**2 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0002.jpg

**View:** Gilbert's Restaurant and Family Residence site at the corner of North Main and Lynn Streets, view southeast

**3 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0003.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant front (west) façade, view east

**4 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0004.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant north elevation, view southeast

**5 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0005.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant east elevation, view west

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**6 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0006.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant south elevation, view north

**7 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0007.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant, interior 1<sup>st</sup> floor café and dining area, view north

**8 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0008.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant, interior 1<sup>st</sup> floor counter area, view northeast

**9 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0009.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant, interior 1<sup>st</sup> floor dining area, view east

**10 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0010.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant, interior 1<sup>st</sup> floor view of side entrance, view north

**11 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0011.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant, interior 1<sup>st</sup> floor front entrance and office view, view southwest

**12 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0012.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant, interior 1<sup>st</sup> floor kitchen, view east

**13 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0013.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant, interior 2<sup>nd</sup> floor apartment one (rear) entry way with laundry and unsafe deteriorating flooring, view north

**14 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0014.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant, interior 2<sup>nd</sup> floor apartment two (front) sitting/living room, view north

**15 of 15:** VA\_Chatham\_GilbertsRestaurant\_0015.jpg

**View:** Gilberts Restaurant, interior 2<sup>nd</sup> floor apartment two, front room, view west

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### Historic Images Log

**1 of 6:** ca. 1950 Siamese Twins Signed Souvenir Postcard, courtesy of Bob Gilbert (front)

**2 of 6:** ca. 1950 Siamese Twins Signed Souvenir Postcard, courtesy of Bob Gilbert (back)

**3 of 6:** ca. 1960 Fats Domino Signed Souvenir Postcard, courtesy of Bob Gilbert (front)

**4 of 6:** ca. 1960 Fats Domino Signed Souvenir Postcard, courtesy of Bob Gilbert (back)

**5 of 6:** 1983 Photograph of exterior of Gilberts Restaurant, view northeast, courtesy of Bob Gilbert

**6 of 6:** 1983 Photograph of interior of Gilberts Restaurant with flattened Tudor Arched kitchen opening framed with wood surround, view east, courtesy of Bob Gilbert

Gilbert's Restaurant  
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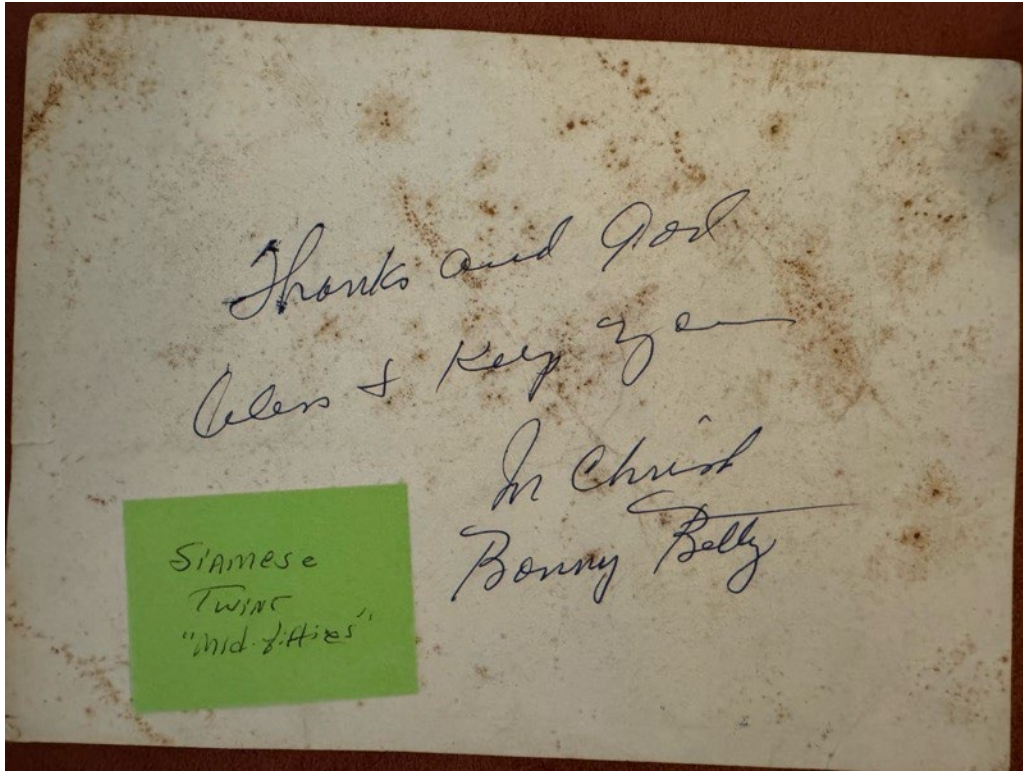
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1 of 6: ca. 1950 Siamese Twins Signed Souvenir Postcard, courtesy of Bob Gilbert (front)

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2 of 6: ca. 1950 Siamese Twins Signed Souvenir Postcard, courtesy of Bob Gilbert (back)



Gilbert's Restaurant  
Name of Property

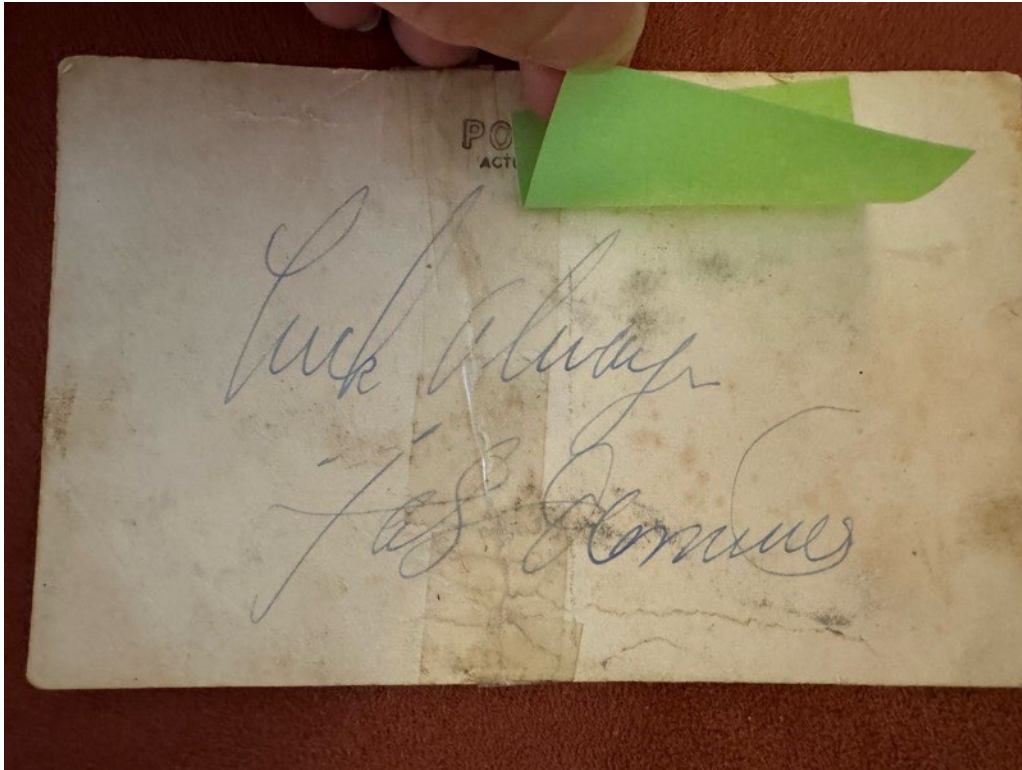
Pittsylvania County, VA  
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3 of 6: ca. 1960 Fats Domino Signed Souvenir Postcard, courtesy of Bob Gilbert (front)

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**4 of 6:** ca. 1960 Fats Domino Signed Souvenir Postcard, courtesy of Bob Gilbert (back)

Gilbert's Restaurant  
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**5 of 6:** 1983 Photograph of exterior of Gilberts Restaurant, view northeast, courtesy of Bob Gilbert

Gilbert's Restaurant  
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**6 of 6:** 1983 Photograph of interior of Gilberts Restaurant with partial view of flattened Tudor Arched kitchen opening framed with wood surround, view east, courtesy of Bob Gilbert

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for nominations 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.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.