

The Arna Bontemps House (c.1900) is a simple one story frame Queen Anne Revival cottage located on a corner lot in a late nineteenth/early twentieth century residential neighborhood on the edge of downtown Alexandria. Although it has been moved a short distance and has received various alterations, the house retains its National Register eligibility as the childhood home of African-American writer Arna Wendell Bontemps.

The Bontemps House was originally located on the corner of Ninth and Winn six blocks from the present location. In the shadow of Interstate 49 construction, the long abandoned and deteriorated house was donated to the Arna Bontemps Foundation on condition it be removed due to anticipated redevelopment of the lot. The move and subsequent renovation occurred in 1991. The house was dedicated in November 1992 as the Arna Bontemps African American Museum and Cultural Center.

The facade features a polygonal bay with an Eastlake porch to the side. The original posts, which were rotted at the bottom, were removed and very similar ones used. The present balustrade was installed to meet life safety codes, and simple brackets were added to the posts. As part of the move, the roof structure was completely removed and rebuilt. A shed roof rear addition was removed, and the house was expanded roughly nine feet across the rear, continuing the character of the original.

The original portion of the house has a central hall with two rooms on each side. There are two front doors, one opening into the central hall and one opening into the room with the polygonal bay. One original mantel survives, while the other fireplace was removed to make room for a closet. (The mantel is in storage.) The surviving Greek Revival-looking mantel gives every indication of being a good deal older than the house.

The following additional changes occurred as part of the recent renovation of the house:

(1) The original windows (four over four) were virtually all gone. They were replaced with one over ones.

(2) One of the front doors was missing. The remaining one was moved to an interior location, and two matching salvaged doors were used on the front.

(3) Most of the present interior doors are salvaged replacements, and the door and window surrounds replicate the originals.

(4) The originally wallpapered walls were sheetrocked. (5) A handicap access ramp was installed at the rear.

Assessment of Integrity

Despite the changes and replacement of architectural fabric, the house would be immediately recognizable to Arna Bontemps, which is the litmus test for eligibility under Criterion B.

In terms of the move, it should be noted that the new location is not inappropriate. The house has been moved from one corner lot to another in a late nineteenth/early twentieth century residential neighborhood on the edge of downtown Alexandria. It also should be stressed that Bontemps would not recognize the old location today. Because of I-49 construction, the housing stock has been greatly depleted, and there is an elevated freeway practically in the Bontemps back yard. The enclosed photo shows the house's original location as it appears today. The houses immediately around it have been demolished.

Significant dates N/A
Architect/Builder unknown
Criterion B

The Arna Wendell Bontemps House is of national significance in the area of literature because it was the home of one of the most productive and versatile African-American writers of the twentieth century. Bontemps lived in the house from his birth in 1902 until 1906, when his family moved to California. Although a childhood home rather than one associated with Bontemps' productive life, the house is eligible for the Register because, according to scholars, the author's works were influenced greatly by this early, formative period. Also, the home was especially important to Bontemps, as evidenced by his words and actions and the reminiscences of his family. Finally, it could well be argued that Bontemps' childhood home is the most appropriate surviving resource to represent him.

Although far from a household word, Arna Bontemps' name is well known to scholars and students of African-American literature. Hence this nomination will provide only a summation of his life and career. Bontemps was born in 1902 to a middle class Alexandria family. His father was a brickmason, his mother a teacher. As Bontemps later wrote: "Mine had not been a varmint-infested childhood so often the hallmark of Negro American autobiography. My parents and grandparents had been well-fed, well-clothed, and well-housed. . . ."

Bontemps' seemingly idyllic childhood in Central Louisiana, as described in his autobiographical essay "Why I Returned," ended when he was four. Because of a racial slur directed at his father, and more importantly, its larger implications, the family moved to California. Bontemps writes that the decision his father made as he walked home after the incident "changed everything for all of us."

After receiving his bachelor's degree in California in 1923, Bontemps accepted a teaching position at the Harlem Academy in New York, where he remained until 1931. There he became part of a reawakening in black culture known as the Harlem Renaissance. In 1924, his poetry first appeared in Crisis magazine, the NAACP periodical edited by Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, and three years later, he was awarded the publication's Poetry Prize. He also won the Alexander Pushkin Poetry Prize in 1926 and '27. His first novel, God Sends Sunday, was published in 1931. From 1931 to 1934, Bontemps taught in Huntsville, Alabama and from '35 to '37 in Chicago. Upon completion of his master's degree in library science from the University of Chicago in 1943, he became head librarian at Fisk University in Nashville, a position he held until 1965. The eight years remaining in his life were spent as a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle and Yale, and finally as writer-in-residence at Fisk. He died at his Nashville home June 4, 1973.

Bontemps is known for the volume of his work and his versatility. He is the author of twenty-five books, including novels, children's books, biographies, histories, and collections of poems, and a handful of plays, some in collaboration with Countee Cullen. In addition, he served as editor or co-editor of various anthologies (for example, with Langston Hughes, The Poetry of the Negro).

Although Bontemps was quite young when he left Alexandria, he had definite memories of his childhood in the house under consideration, as affectionately recalled in his autobiographical essay "Why I Returned." His precocious childhood memories were reinforced and augmented by stories from relatives who also migrated to California from Central Louisiana. According to Bontemps, they were forever talking about things "back home."

By definition, a writer's work has elements of the autobiographical in it, and scholars note that this is particularly true of Bontemps, with Central Louisiana figuring prominently. According to Professor Charles L. James, who is presently working on a biography of the author, Central Louisiana represents "the central matrix" for his "fictive imagination." "It was the place of precocious childhood memory, the focal point of return when he spoke and wrote wistfully of his Southern past." Phyllis R. Klotman, Professor of Afro-American Studies at Indiana University, emphasizes how important a writer's early experiences are to later works. She writes: "Bontemps' writing especially is rooted to the past, to Alexandria his home, to Louisiana, and to the South." After visiting Alexandria for a Bontemps symposium, Professor Klotman noted: "The vivid descriptions of place in the short stories I first taught in the '70s assumed a reality for me that they had never had before."

It is clear that the house was special to Bontemps. As has been mentioned, he wrote fondly of his Alexandria childhood in his autobiographical essay, referring specifically to the house. By that time, 1965, he had been back to see it because he mentioned that the last time he visited Louisiana the house in which he was born was freshly painted. His son, Arna Alexander Bontemps, notes that to his father "back home" always meant the house in Alexandria. The week before he died he had made arrangements to go home again to complete research he was doing for his autobiography and to take his sons to, in his words, "have another look at their grandparents' stomping ground."

Bontemps' widow and biographer Charles L. James feel unequivocally that the author's childhood home in Alexandria should be the resource to represent him in the National Register of Historic Places. According to them, the only other surviving building with any compelling association is his home in Nashville, which is non-historic (late '50s). In endorsing the National Register effort for her husband's childhood home, Mrs. Bontemps stated: "It's his roots. He started there; it's the place he wrote about." She continued that "no place should hold precedence over that place."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bontemps, Arna. "Why I Returned." The Old South. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1973. This autobiographical essay first appeared in Harper's Magazine in April 1965.
- Bontemps, Arna. Letter to Irving Ward-Steinman, March 14, 1973.
- Bontemps, Arna Alexander. Letter to Gwen Elmore, President, Arna Bontemps Foundation, Inc., June 6, 1989.
- Conveyance Records, Rapides Parish Courthouse.
- James, Charles L. Letter to Gwen Elmore, President, Arna Bontemps Foundation, Inc., August 31, 1992. A professor at Swarthmore College, James is presently writing a biography of Bontemps.
- James, Charles L. Phone interviews with National Register staff, various dates in 1992 and 1993.
- Jones, Kirkland. Arna Bontemps entry in Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 51, Gale Research Company, 1987.
- Klotman, Phyllis. Letter to Gwen Elmore, President, Arna Bontemps Foundation, Inc., October 7, 1992. Ms. Klotman is a professor of Afro-American Studies at Indiana University.