

Tulane student gets New Orleans civil rights activist's home added to National Register of Historic Places

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Tulane University graduate student Robin S. Smith in front of the New Orleans house once belonging to the family of civil rights activist Oretha Castle Haley. (Photo by Sabree Hill/Tulane University)

A New Orleans home that served as a hub of Louisiana's civil rights movement in the 1960s has been added to the [National Register of Historic Places](#), thanks to the

efforts of a graduate student studying historic preservation at Tulane University's [School of Architecture](#).

The Craftsman-style house at 917-919 N. Tonti Street belonged to the family of activist Oretha Castle Haley, who challenged the segregation of facilities and lunch counters in New Orleans and promoted Black voter registration. The residence she shared with her parents and sister in the Treme neighborhood became known as the Freedom House, serving as a backdrop for pivotal moments in the city's civil rights history.

The home was headquarters of the New Orleans chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and served as a meeting place and organizational center for planning sit-ins and boycotts against segregated businesses. It was also a safe house used to feed and shelter participants in the 1961 Freedom Rides that challenged segregated public buses.

"Once you learn the history of this house, it's impossible to ignore," said Robin S. Smith, a litigation attorney-turned-student in Tulane's [Master of Science in Historic Preservation Program](#).

Smith spearheaded the effort to get the home on the National Register, working closely with the [Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation](#) and the home's current owner.

"My primary concern in this entire process was that I do justice to the history of this place," Smith said. "I knew that if I could just do that, that the nomination would be accepted."

After exhaustive study and coordination, Smith made a detailed presentation before the Review Committee of the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation in August. The nomination was approved at the state level and then by the National Register office of the National Park Service in October.

For a property to qualify for the National Register, it must be at least 50 years old, retain sufficient architectural integrity to convey its historic period and have potential to yield important information. The Freedom House remains largely unchanged from the 1950s and '60s, providing an immersive portal back to the civil rights era.

Properties listed in the National Register, authorized by the [National Historic Preservation Act of 1966](#), are deemed worthy of preservation for their exceptional historic value. The prestigious designation assists efforts to save sites from demolition and makes them eligible for government preservation grants and tax incentives.

The successful nomination of the Castle family home is part of Tulane's hands-on historic preservation curriculum that gives students real-world experience identifying and protecting historic resources.

Previous National Register nominations by Tulane students include the Touro-Shakespeare Home, an early 20th century New Orleans nursing facility, and Caesars [Superdome](#).

Professor [Heather Veneziano](#), the interim associate director of Tulane's preservation program, said completing the lengthy National Register process requires great perseverance, skill and follow-through.

The Freedom House nomination was shepherded through multiple drafts for more than a year. The final nomination spanned 50 pages, with photos, architectural descriptions, site maps and extensively researched arguments for historic value.

The home's current owner plans to establish the Freedom House as a community cultural site and has founded the nonprofit [Friends of the Freedom House](#) to maintain its legacy.

Smith said national recognition raises awareness of this historic gem and preserves its place in history.

"The primary driver of this nomination was the desire to have the importance of this place and its role in history shared and recognized," she said. "For me, it was absolutely a privilege to be trusted with this story, and it was truly a labor of love."





Oretha Castle Haley in 1975 (Photo courtesy of the Louisiana Weekly Photograph Collection, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans)

Doris Jean Castle, sister of Oretha Castle Haley, holds a sign challenging the segregation of facilities and lunch counters in New Orleans in April 1961. (Photo courtesy of the Connie Harse Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans)