

A decorative border with a repeating floral and scrollwork pattern, featuring stylized flowers and leaves, framing the central text.

The Wright-Giles House

Austin, Travis County, Texas

An historical and architectural
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The Historical Significance of the Wright-Giles House

The Wright-Giles House is a remarkable survival in Austin, a High Victorian Italiante-inspired farmhouse with a large lawn in one of the busiest parts of Texas' Capital City. It was the home of Austin pioneers Robert and Malvina Wright and was occupied from 1922 to 1943 by Texas Land Commissioner James Bascom Giles (1901-1993) and his family. Owned since 1956 by St. George's Episcopal Church, the 120 year old Wright-Giles House is being sympathetically adapted for other purposes which will retain its historic integrity and allow for continued use and enjoyment well into the next century.

Robert P. Wright was born in Wilson County, Tennessee in 1835, son of Dr. Joseph Wright (1798-1898), a native of Nash County, Tennessee and his wife Rachel Hamilton Wright (1812-1893), formerly of Herndon, Loudoun County, Virginia. The Wright family came to Travis County, Texas in 1852. In 1855 they acquired a home northeast of the fledgling capital city of Austin from another Tennessee family, Isaiah and Nancy Seaton Ainsworth. That structure, known as the Ainsworth-Wright House, was moved from its original location in 1977, became a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in 1979 and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. It was moved again to the Jourdan-Bachman Farm, which is owned by the City of Austin and operated by the Heritage Society of Austin.

The elder Wright was a physician by training, a farmer and surveyor by trade. He is said to have laid out the University of Texas campus and the city of Tallahassee, Florida. He was also something of a land speculator. In 1865 he deeded a tract of land south of the Wright family homestead to his son Robert.

About the time of the younger Wright's second marriage to Malvina Earnest in 1874, he began work on a new home showing High Victorian Italiante influence, a somewhat unexpected choice for a Texas farmhouse during the Reconstruction era. Most such structures tended to be modest,

vernacular houses reflecting Green Revival symmetry and, occasionally, detailing. The Wright House, however, demonstrates modest but discernible Italiante influence in its massing and detailing that sets it apart somewhat from its contemporaries.

To begin with, rather than a rectangular, symmetrical plan, the Wright House is a T-shaped structure with double windows in the west projection. In that respect it reflects precedents in contemporaneous architectural books and periodicals which abounded after the Civil War. It was therefore a Suburban Villa, albeit a modest one, in what came to be known as the High Victorian Italiante style. That style was of course more popular among affluent city dwellers. The Nalle-Cloud House (moved in the 1960s to Manchaca) and the Eugene Bremond House on West Seventh Street are local examples. The Wright House is thus a rarity as a surviving Italiante farmhouse.

Little information survives about the Wrights' years in the Wright-Giles House. Robert Wright was listed in occasional early directories and in his obituary was described as a merchant and farmer. He apparently did not live on the farm regularly, but in 1903 he was depicted in a city directory as living on "East Ave. 1.25 miles north of E. 23rd." He sold the homestead in 1906, and died in his town home at 1207 San Jacinto in 1910.

The new owners of the Wright House were James N. Hamilton (1837-1908) and his wife, the former Lavenia Burdett (1854-1922). Both the Hamiltons and the Burdetts were Travis County pioneers and were apparently connected with the Wrights. Robert Wright's mother's maiden name was Hamilton; his wife's, Earnest, and his sister's married name, Walling. Two of J. N. Hamilton's nieces were Mrs. Thomas Walling and Mrs. James N. Earnest. The exact genealogical ties are not known, but apparently did exist.

Hamilton enjoyed the East Avenue house only two years. When he died in 1908, his obituary referred to him as "one of the best known and most

highly respected citizens of Travis County," and his pallbearers included prominent citizens John H. Robinson, Jr. and Walter Bremond.

His widow, "Aunt Vinnie," lived in the house until her death there in 1922. At some point between 1909 and 1914, Mrs. Hamilton married her second husband, one William N. Hessey, listed in various city directories as a farmer or retired. At her death, the property was sold.

The new owner of the Wright House and Farm was scion of yet another early and distinguished Travis County family named James Bascom Giles, and he was certainly the most celebrated occupant of the house. The son of Banton White Giles, East Austin land owner and investor, Bascom Giles graduated from the University of Texas in 1919, and two years later married (Effie) Dean Rogan. The young Giles apparently did not purchase the Wright House from the Estate of Lavenia Hessey until 1924, but they are listed in the 1923 city directory as living in the East Avenue house, with Bascom Giles working as a draftsman at the General Land Office.

Giles' career at the Land Office began after his graduation from the University of Texas, when he took a job with Land Commissioner J. T. Robison. His responsibilities increased at the Land Office, and in the 1938 race he succeeded Land Commissioner William H. McDonald. He was elected and sworn in (from a hospital bed) January 1, 1939.

The Giles and their sons, James Bascom Giles, Jr. and Rogan Banton Giles lived at the Wright House until 1943, when their older son left Austin to attend the U. S. Military Academy at West Point. At that time the Giles moved into the old Giles homestead at 2824 Manor Road, although they retained ownership of the East Avenue property for several years longer. The Wright ownership of the house was all but forgotten, and it is commonly known as the Giles House for its most famous occupant and in memory of the considerable official entertaining that took place in the house and on its grounds. In the

late 1940s, Bascom Giles developed various family farms into the Delwood and Maplewood neighborhoods now surrounding the old Wright home.

Giles remained Land Commissioner for seventeen years. He was a highly influential public figure who some felt had a reasonable shot at the Governor's Mansion. On January 1, 1955, however, he declined to take his oath of office as Land Commissioner. He was shortly thereafter tried and convicted of wrongdoing in regard to the Veteran's Land Program, one of the more significant programs instituted under his leadership. At the completion of his sentence, he left Texas. The longest and strongest association of the Wright-Giles House, however, is with Bascom Giles and his years as a public figure.

The Wright House changed hands several times after Giles' ownership. In 1956 developers traded land owned by recently founded St. George's Episcopal Church. The Church's property became the site of Capital Plaza Shopping Center, and, in exchange, the church received the Wright-Giles House and grounds. The church has maintained the house largely as an accommodation for students at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest. In spite of the construction of church buildings on the reduced grounds, Giles House retains its rural character to an unusual degree. Facing Interstate Highway 35 near the heart of Austin, the house features a very generous lawn with many mature live oak and pecan trees. There have been only minor alterations to the exterior of the Wright-Giles House over the years. The fan and side lights surrounding the front door were added about 1950, and a Colonial Revival portico likely added at the turn of the century was replaced in the 1980s with one more in keeping with the Victorian character of the house and based on the structural detailing of the building's historic rear porch. Since the Giles' tenure, a nonhistoric veranda (apparently dating from the Hessey ownership) has been removed. The fine walnut staircase and other significant interior features remain. Otherwise, it appears much the same as when constructed by

Robert and Malvina Wright well over a century ago and enjoyed by Bascom and
Dean Giles for twenty important years.

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Giles House Chronology

- 1835 Robert P. Wright born in Wilson County, Tennessee
- 1837 James N. Hamilton born in Donelson County, Tennessee
- 1844 Lavenia Burdett born in Travis County, Texas
- 1852 Wright family moved to Texas
- 1863 James Hamilton and Lavenia Burdett married in Travis County
- 1865 Joseph Wright sold 88 acre tract NE of Austin to son Robert for \$700
- ca.1870 Robert Wright constructed Italiante farmhouse
- 1874 Robert Wright married Malvina Earnest
- 1898 Joseph Wright died in Austin in his 100th year; buried in Oakwood Cemetery
- 1899 (James) Bascom Giles born in Travis County
- 1906 Robert Wright sold farm to James Hamilton
- 1908 James Hamilton died; buried in Oakwood Cemetery
- 1910 Robert Wright died; buried in Oakwood Cemetery
- 1919 Giles graduated from UT and began work at the General Land Office
- 1921 Giles and Effie Dean Rogan married
- 1922 Lavenia Burdett Hamilton Hessey died at Wright House
- 1924 Estate of L. B. H. Hessey sold Wright farm to Bascom and Dean Giles
- 1938 Giles elected Land Commissioner for the State of Texas
- 1949 St. George's Episcopal Mission founded
- 1955 Bascom Giles left General Land Office; convicted of wrongdoing.
- 1956 St George's acquired the Giles House.
- 1993 Bascom Giles died in Venice, Florida