



**PRELIMINARY INFORMATION FORM (PIF) for INDIVIDUAL PROPERTIES**

*Note: PIFs are prepared by applicants and evaluated by DHR staff and the State Review Board based on information known at the time of preparation. Recommendations concerning PIFs are subject to change if new information becomes available.*

**DHR No. (to be completed by DHR staff)** 187-5005

**1. General Property Information**

Property name: Gilbert's Restaurant

Property address: 401 N. Main Street

City or Town: Town of Chatham

Zip code: 24531

Name of the Independent City or County where the property is located: Pittsylvania County

Category of Property (choose only one of the following):

Building  Site  Structure  Object

**2. Physical Aspects**

Acreage: 0.095

Setting (choose only one of the following):

Urban  Suburban  Town  Village  Hamlet  Rural

Briefly describe the property's overall location and setting, including any notable landscape features:

Gilbert's Restaurant is located at the northern corner of North Main Street and Lynn Street in Chatham, Virginia, about half a mile north of downtown. The surrounding area is mostly made up of homes, with some community buildings and gas stations briefly interrupting the residential character. 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. Flanking the northern side of the restaurant building is the family home of the Gilberts, who own the Gilbert's Restaurant building. The landscape features are minimal as the building has been used for storage since 1999.

### 3. Architectural Description

Architectural Style(s): Commercial Style; Craftsman-style American Foursquare

If the property was designed by an architect, landscape architect, engineer, or other professional, please list here: \_\_\_\_\_

If the builder is known, please list here: Rev. Robert Gregory Gilbert

Date of construction (can be approximate): 1945 ca.

#### **Narrative Description (Please do not exceed one page in describing the property):**

Briefly describe the property's general characteristics, such as its current use (and historic use if different), as well as the primary building or structure on the property (such as a house, store, mill, factory, depot, bridge, etc.). Include the materials and method(s) of construction, physical appearance and condition (exterior and interior), and any additions or other major alterations.

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 served as a gas station, restaurant, grocery, general store, and tourist home through the early 1970s and continued primarily as a restaurant until 1999. Since 1999, it has been used for storage.

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 entrance flanked to the north by three four-light, fixed wood windows. The front of the building features a canopy supported by vertical metal posts. A pedimented overhang supported by simple wood balustrades shelters the side entrance on the north elevation. 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 6/6 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.

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 arched openings framed with wood trim.

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 apartment finishes are vinyl 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 retains historic integrity and remains in stable condition. 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.

In a bullet list, include any outbuildings or secondary resources or major landscape features (such as barns, sheds, dam and mill pond, storage tanks, scales, railroad spurs, etc.), including their condition and their estimated construction dates.

- The family home of the Gilberts stands at 405 N. Main, adjacent to the restaurant. Built by Rev. Gilbert around the same time as the restaurant in 1945, this two-story dwelling with a front-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 is an example of the American Foursquare form with Craftsman-style features. There is a small ca. 1983 addition on the building's northern elevation that is sheathed 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 with Rev. Robert and Arzelia Gilbert and then with Bob and Sandy Gilbert who have called 405 N. Main Street home since the 1980s.

#### 4. Property's History and Significance (Please do not exceed one page)

Briefly explain the property's historic importance, such as significant events, persons, and/or families associated with the property.

If the property is important for its architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, or other aspects of design, please include a brief explanation of this aspect.

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 continual reminder of the hospitality, warmth, and strength of the Gilbert family whose two generations built and ran the locally beloved restaurant as a haven for residents and visitors for over fifty years.

According to his son, Bob, Rev. Robert Gregory Gilbert was a jack-of-all-trades who built the restaurant, the family house next door, and several buildings surrounding this property for his family around 1945. The building was the second iteration of Gilbert's Restaurant, which opened originally in 1939 just a block south of its more recent location. Formerly farmers, the Rev. Robert Gregory Gilbert, with his wife Arzelia (née Craft) sold their farm to purchase land in 1944 for the building that would house Gilbert's Restaurant at 401 N. Main Street, once the main artery of 29 South that ran through Chatham before the bypass was built in the 1960s. The store became a sort of haven for the Black community, who, under racial segregation, could not freely dine or stay at just any establishment. Gilbert's served a variety of uses including a gas station, a grocery and general store, a beauty salon, a tourist home and apartments, and a restaurant. In front of the building there once was a large sign—now long gone—that read "For Colored," signaling to Black passersby that they would be welcome unlike at the many white establishments that unfairly excluded them.

Rev. Gilbert was already known in the community for his pastorship of the Waller family, whose son Odell Waller was tried, convicted by an all-white jury, and executed in 1942 for fatally shooting his white landlord in self-defense. The Waller family's tragedy was unfortunately not the only violence that touched the Gilbert's lives. In 1951, the Martinsville Seven—seven men accused of raping a white woman in 1949—were tried, convicted by an all-white jury, and executed. Rev. Gilbert's son, Bob Gilbert, has memories of the lawyers who defended the Martinsville Seven meeting in the haven that was Gilbert's Restaurant between 1950 and 1951 as they discussed the case and worked on the defense for those seven men.

Gilbert's Restaurant also became a home for more joyous occasions: it was a frequented stop made by touring Black entertainers, although the establishment was never listed in the Green Book. According to the Gilbert family, who kept a guest book along with autographed souvenirs from visitors in the 1950s and 1960s, among their visitors included the Singing Siamese Twins, Yvonne and Yvette McCarther, who were joined at the head. American singer and songwriter Fats Domino stopped in, dazzling restaurant staff with a gemmed pinky ring and eating several large portions of Mrs. Gilbert's pinto beans. A young James Earl Jones, then a stage actor, also stopped in to dine and stay during this time.

In 1971, Bob Gilbert, with his wife Sandy, took over Gilbert's Restaurant from his parents and eventually purchased the building and business in 1973. Rev. Gilbert and his wife Arzelia passed away in 1980 and 1990, respectively. With the Route 29 bypass routing visitors out of the downtown and as integration following the struggle for civil rights opened new venues for Black people to frequent, the restaurant became the central focus of the building. Gilbert's became well known in Chatham and the area for its good southern cooking,

including lemon chess, sweet potato, and fried apple pies, fried and boiled chitterlings, fried chicken, pinto beans, cornbread, homemade lemonade, and iced tea.

Gilbert's Restaurant is potentially eligible for listing on the National Register under Criterion A with significance on the local level in the areas of Commerce and Black Heritage. The proposed period of significance begins circa 1945 with the building's date of construction and ends in 1974 (fifty-year cut-off for historic properties). According to V-CRIS records, of the 19 districts and historic buildings currently deemed eligible or listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register in the town of Chatham, none have a Black cultural affiliation. Among the resources surveyed in the greater Pittsylvania County, there are only 14 resources with such an affiliation, mostly Black cemeteries or rural farms. Gilbert's Restaurant would potentially be the first landmark with Black cultural significance listed in the town of Chatham and the first of such with a commercial and social context in Pittsylvania County. While there is no question that this building is locally significant, state and national listing of Gilbert's Restaurant would yield a more robust story of Southside Virginia, one that has ties to broader patterns of the history of segregation in the United States.

Please list all sources of information used to research the history of the property, such as deeds, census and tax records, and/or published articles and books. (It is not necessary to attach lengthy articles or family genealogies to this form.)

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- Bland, Laura, and Benson Benson. “Man Arrested After Double Murder.” *Danville Register & Bee*, January 30, 1993, sec. 1.
- *Danville Register & Bee*. “Arzelia C. Gilbert.” June 8, 1990, sec. 2. Newspapers.com.
- *Danville Register & Bee*. “Clipping: Biz News.” July 28, 1999, sec. 14. Newspapers.com.
- *Danville Register & Bee*. “Rev. Robert Gilbert.” December 11, 1980, sec. 28. Newspapers.com.
- Edge, John T. *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South*. New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2017.
- Foster, Mark S. “In the Face of ‘Jim Crow’: Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel and Outdoor Leisure, 1890-1945.” *The Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 2 (April 1999): 130–49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2649043>.
- Gilbert, Bob. “Gilbert’s Restaurant: Speech to Local Historical Society.” Presented at the Pittsylvania County Historical Society Meeting, Chatham, Virginia, April 16, 2018.
- Gilbert, Robert L. (Bob). Gilbert’s Restaurant Interview. Interview by Elsabe C. (Ina) Dixon, June 25, 2024.
- Guffey, Elizabeth. “Knowing Their Space: Signs of Jim Crow in the Segregated South.” *Design Issues/The MIT Press* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 41–60.
- McCullough, Mitch. “Gilbert’s: Chatham Grocery Also Serves Home Cooking.” *Danville Register & Bee*, May 20, 1986, sec. 7. Newspapers.com.
- McKelway, Bill. “Lingering Doubt: Kennedy Case Not Closed Yet.” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 9, 1986, sec. 5.
- Murray, Pauli. 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).
- Pittsylvania County Chamber of Commerce. “Gilbert’s Restaurant Is Business of Month.” *Danville Register & Bee*, July 17, 1985, sec. 15. Newspapers.com.
- “Pittsylvania County, Virginia Deed Records by and between Arzelia Gilbert and Robert L. Gilbert and Sandra L. Gilbert: Book 638, Page 167-8,” July 21, 1977.
- “Pittsylvania County, Virginia Deed Records by and between Arzelia Gilbert and Robert L. Gilbert and Sandra L. Gilbert: Book 722, Page 522-3,” April 6, 1983.
- “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.
- “Pittsylvania County, Virginia Deed Records: Survey Map 1-253B,” November 16, 1944.
- Rise, Eric W. “Race, Rape, and Radicalism: The Case of the Martinsville Seven, 1949-1951.” *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 3 (August 1992): 461. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2210164>.
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- ———. “1940 Census of Population and Housing: Pittsylvania County, Chatham District. Sheet No. 8A,” April 15, 1940. Ancestry.com.
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**5. Property Ownership** (Check as many categories as apply):

Private: X Public\Local \_\_\_\_\_ Public\State \_\_\_\_\_ Public\Federal \_\_\_\_\_

**Current Legal Owner(s) of the Property** (If the property has more than one owner, please list each below or on an additional sheet.)

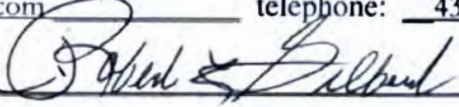
name/title: Robert L. Gilbert

organization: \_\_\_\_\_

street & number: 405 N. Main Street

city or town: Chatham state: VA zip code: 24531

e-mail: gilbertthg@aol.com telephone: 434-251-8808

Legal Owner's Signature: 

Date: 7/3/24

•• Signature required for processing all applications. ••

In the event of corporate ownership you must provide the name and title of the appropriate contact person.

Contact person: \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

**Applicant Information** (Individual completing form if other than legal owner of property)

name/title: Ina Dixon

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: 7/9/2024

PLEASE DO NOT ATTACH CONTINUATION SHEETS TO THIS FORM. THANK YOU!

May 20, 1986

# Gilbert's

## Chatham grocery also serves home cooking

By Mitch McCullough  
Register Staff Writer

CHATHAM — Not many celebrities have eaten at Gilbert's Restaurant and Grocery since the main highway through town was rerouted.

But back in the 1950s, black performers stopped for the home-style cooking while passing by on U.S. 29 on the way to another performance. Lloyd Price, James Earl Jones and Fats Domino all ate at Gilbert's and owner Robert L. Gilbert, then 15, remembers the enormous diamond ring on Domino's finger.

"He liked my mom's pinto beans," Gilbert, now 47, says. "He ate several bowls."

Gilbert's place has had to change with the times. It gradually has evolved from a general store with a small sandwich shop to a restaurant with a small store.

While celebrities no longer make it a regular stop, lovers of chitterlings from Danville, Hurt and even Lynchburg come by Friday and Saturdays to eat them fried or boiled. Gilbert says a chitterlings club came down from Lynchburg last fall. "I had never heard of a chitterlings club until these fellows came in," he says.

Gilbert claims the family restaurant is the oldest operating under the same name in the area. He has worked there since he was a small boy, only taking breaks when he went to college in Pennsylvania.

His father, Robert G. Gilbert, operated a smaller store across the street before moving to the present location on the north end of town in 1952. His son was only a teen-ager then, but practically lived at the

store when he wasn't in school, stocking shelves and sweeping the floor. Now Gilbert's 6-year-old son, Bobby, has taken over that role. "He has it easier than I did," Gilbert says.

Gilbert's father was "sort of a jack-of-all trades," Gilbert says. Not content to run a general store, his father was pastor of several churches and, as a carpenter and construction worker, built some churches and other buildings around Chatham. "He was always busy," Gilbert recalls.

Gilbert's mother, Arzelia Gilbert, who also worked at the store, is now retired and lives next door.

After Gilbert graduated from Northside High School in Gretna, he eventually moved to Bethlehem, Pa. to attend Moravian College where he met his wife, Sandra.

Sandra Gilbert cooks homemade pies — cherry, coconut, pecan, lemon chess and sweet potato, to name a few.

"We don't have any instant anything," Gilbert boasts. Most of the food served is made from scratch, he says.

One of the cooks, Mary Davis, has been working at the restaurant for about 30 years. "She's one of the best cooks in the country," Gilbert says.

Augusta "Sis" Coates also cooks and Gilbert hires area high school girls during the summers, when business picks up.

When summertime rolls around, Gilbert's fresh-squeezed lemonade is popular, he says.

He keeps a salad bar stocked with small amounts of fruits and vegetables. "In a small town, to keep things fresh, you put out small



(Staff photo by Mitch McCullough)

**Bob and Sandra Gilbert serve chitterlings at their restaurant and grocery store every Friday and Saturday.**

amounts," Gilbert explains.

Most of Gilbert's customers are working people who don't hang around for a long time, but the relax-

ing atmosphere sometimes brings out the best in small-town gossip, he says.

"If there's some juicy gossip, you'll hear it."



**Location Map**

Gilbert's Restaurant  
401 N. Main Street  
Courtesy of Google Maps

187-5005  
2024 PIF



### Sketch Map

Gilbert's Restaurant

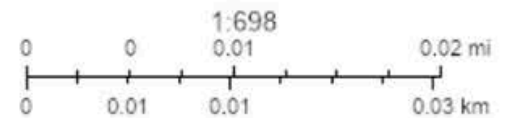
401 N. Main Street

Courtesy of Pittsylvania County ArcGIS

### ArcGIS Web Map



6/25/2024, 12:40:54 PM



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\$15.00  
Service Charge  
ON ALL  
Returned Checks

RC  
TAPE

RC  
Cola

PEPSI

Beverages All

