

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

RECEIVED JUN 19 1987 NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16).

1. Name of Property

historic name Thomas, Alma, House other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 1530 15th Street N.W. city, town Washington state District of Columbia code DC county N/A code 001 zip code 20005

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: private (checked), public-local, public-State, public-Federal. Category of Property: building(s) (checked), district, site, structure, object. Number of Resources within Property: Contributing 1, Noncontributing buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total 1.

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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 (checked) does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of certifying official: Carol P. Thompson, State Historic Preservation Officer, Date: November 13, 1987.

In my opinion, the property meets (checkbox) does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of commenting or other official: State or Federal agency and bureau

5. 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:). Signature of the Keeper, Date of Action: 7/28/87

## 6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Domestic/Single Dwelling

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Domestic/Single Dwelling

## 7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Late Victorian/Italianate

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Brick

walls Brick

roof Metal

other N/A

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Alma Thomas house, located at 1530 15th Street, N.W., is a well-preserved example of a typical Italianate residence that housed middle-class Washingtonians in the 1870s. It is a simple two-story brick building with a one-story bay window and a flat roof. Originally red brick, the building is now painted white. Decorative features located along the east facade are characteristic of the Italianate style, popular throughout the United States from c. 1840-1880. These include the emphatic wooden cornice with supporting brackets which articulate the facade, marking off three bays. An antifix marks each end of the cornice. The frieze below the cornice has a raised, molded, lozenge-shaped panel in each third, with a four-leaf pattern engraved in the center.

Th house was built around 1875 on land formerly owned by Columbian University, now George Washington University. Thomas G. Allen, who acquired the land in 1874-1875, presumably built the house about this time, in the years before D.C. building permits begin in 1877 (D.C. Recorder of Deeds, land records 1874, liber 743, p. 389, February 18, 1874; see also liber 802, November 24, 1875, pp.408-409). A one-story brick rear section was added in 1881 (National Archives, D.C. building permit no. 452, lot 35, square 194, October 13, 1881, owner Thomas G. Allan). The house was extended further to the west in the early 1950s, when Alma Thomas added a bath and kitchen (the kitchen served as her painting studio). The Thomas family has owned and lived in the house since 1907, and continues to do so.

The three windows in the upper facade, segmentally arched, are topped with segmental hood molds, each with foliate stops. The half-hexagonal bay window projection covers the left two-thirds of the facade on the first floor, looking out on Alma Thomas' beloved holly tree. The three tall, slender windows in the projection, each with two-over-two lights, also have segmental tops. At the top of the bay window projection is a cornice with scalloped and dentil moldings,

## 8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Art  
Black  
Education

Period of Significance

Home of famous black  
woman artist, 1907-1978

Significant Dates

1907-1978

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

Thomas, Alma

Architect/Builder

N/A

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

### Summary

The Alma Thomas house, for more than 70 years, served as the residence and studio of this noted black woman artist and educator. As the Historic Preservation Review Board stated when designating it a D.C. Historic Landmark, "The Alma Thomas House is important because it is associated with the life of an artist important not only for her contributions as a painter to the artistic heritage of both Washington, D.C. and the nation, but also for her dedication to educating and introducing both young and adult blacks to the world of art during the time of segregation in the National Capital."

Alma Thomas' local importance began in the 1920s and 1930s as a highly influential educator in the D.C. public school system and culminated in the 1960s and 1970s when she gained widespread recognition as an artist. Her home was an integral force in her life and artistic career, serving as a major source of inspiration and frequent subject of her art. Therefore, the Alma Thomas house is of exceptional significance to black history and culture of the District of Columbia and qualifies for listing on the National Register under Criteria Consideration (Exception) G.

### Statement of Significance

The paintings of Alma Thomas hang in the National Gallery of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Hirshorn Museum, the Phillips Collection, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the National Museum of American Art, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Her canvases and works on paper, especially her subtly ordered, mosaic-like arrangements of small, intense color patches that seem to vibrate against luminous grounds, led her to national renown and affection as an artist beginning at age 75. Her former teacher, the celebrated painter Jacob Kainen, has said of her: "Alma Thomas' work shows a special quality that has always been in short supply--felicity combined with emotional and intellectual depth. Her paintings nourish the spirit."

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation. A Study of Historic Sites in the District of Columbia of Special Significance to Afro-Americans. Washington, D.C., 1972. 2 vols.

Alma W. Thomas. Recent Paintings 1975-1976. Exhibition at Martha Jackson West Gallery, 521 West 57th Street, New York, October 23 - November 17, 1976. Introduction by Robert Doty, statement by Alma Thomas.

Alma Thomas Retrospective Exhibition, September 8 - October 15, 1972. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Introduction by Jacob Kainen, essay by David C. Driskell.

See continuation sheet

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 # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

N/A

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property less than one.

UTM References

A 18 323560 4308630  
 Zone Easting Northing

C         

B           
 Zone Easting Northing

D         

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The property at 1530 15th Street, N.W., occupies city lot 35, square 194.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city lot that has historically been associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Miss J. Maurice Thomas (updated by Traceries, 1606 20th St. N.W., Washington, D.C.)

organization N/A date August 1986

street & number 1530 15th Street, N.W. telephone 202-265-4321

city or town Washington state D.C. zip code 20005

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similar to the cornice above the front door in the right bay. The door, surrounded by a broad, flat, wooden molding, has its cornice resting on open-work scrolled brackets with stylized leaf ornament hanging down. Similar brackets descending from the cornice flank each window in the projection.

The doorway itself is segmentally arched, with a transom at the top. The present front door is modern. Iron steps leading up to the door have front faces wrought into rinceaux motifs that contain an occasional star. Ornamental balusters adorn the railings.

Inside the house, the first floor has a narrow entrance hall. Front and rear parlors to the left (south) have original wooden moldings. A rear bedroom to the west was formerly a dining room. The second floor, now a separate apartment, has a hallway at the top of the steps leading to a small kitchen on the east. A parlor is south of the kitchen and hallway. On the west are two bedrooms. In the back yard is a small patio, ringed with a garden whose plants include the crape myrtle that was another artistic inspiration for Alma Thomas.

Besides providing an influential living and working environment to Alma Thomas, the house at 1530 15th Street, N.W. is a tangible reminder that, in the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, 15th Street was part of an important black middle-class neighborhood, populated by professionals, scholars, educators, ministers and artists.

Rosa Douglass Sprague, a granddaughter of Frederick Douglass and a teacher in the D.C. public schools, had lived at 1530 15th Street before Alma Thomas' parents arrived in 1907. Neighbors at 1532 15th Street were the family of Henry I. Patterson, a mason who had built his family home, one of the first houses on the block, before 1875 (a bay window was added in 1878). His six children came to include four teachers, a lawyer and an architect. One daughter, Mary Jane, had become the first black woman to receive a B.A. degree from Oberlin College in 1862. In 1871 she became the first principal of the Preparatory High School for Negroes, a forerunner of Dunbar, and served in that position until 1884, except for one year. She continued as a teacher in the school until her death in 1894. Henry Patterson's children (Emma and Jane) and a grandchild (Florence Patterson Clark) continued to live in the house until the 1940s.

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Among other late nineteenth-century residents of the neighborhood were educator Francis L. Cardozo, namesake of Cardozo High School (1463 Swann Street); and Christian Fleetwood, the Civil War hero and Congressional Medal of Honor winner who became a civic leader and choirmaster at Saint Luke's Episcopal and 15th Street Presbyterian Churches. 1419 Swann Street, where Fleetwood lived, had been home to activist minister Francis Grimke of 15th Street Presbyterian Church earlier in the nineteenth century. John A. Lankford, the black architect, professor and engineer who designed the United Order of True Reformers' building at 1200 U Street, N.W. (1903), had an office at 1448 Q Street. He was also the designer of numerous churches for black congregations in the South.

Later neighbors include poet Georgia Douglas Johnson, who hosted a literary salon for black writers and scholars at her home at 15th and S Streets (1461 S) in the 1920s and 1930s. Her husband, Henry Lincoln Johnson, had been appointed Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia in the Taft administration (1908). Among the visitors to Saturday night gatherings at their home were such writers as Langston Hughes, E.C. Williams, Marita Bonner, May Miller, Angelina Grimke (another near neighbor at 1415 Corcoran) and historian Carter G. Woodson. Out of town visitors such as W.E.B. DuBois and Jean Toomer sometimes joined the group, known as the "Saturday Nighters."

The Thomases were members of nearby Saint Luke's Episcopal Church, the first independent black Episcopal Church in the District of Columbia. Founded in 1876, the church building was probably designed by Calvin Brent, one of the first black architects practicing in the District. Other major black churches along 15th Street, focal points of black social and intellectual as well as religious life, were 15th Street Presbyterian, located at 15th and R since 1918; Metropolitan A.M.E. at 1518 M (opened 1881), and Saint Augustine's Roman Catholic Church (originally in the 1100 block of 15th Street, and later, in the 1920s, moving north to the 1700 block; in 1961 it merged with the parish of Saint Paul's at 15th and V Streets; the new parish became Saints Paul and Augustine, recently renamed Saint Augustine.

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Although her best known paintings are abstractions, her art is closely bound up with impressions of nature as experienced in the environment where she lived for more than 70 years--the city of Washington--and particularly with the visible world as she perceived it through the windows of the house at 1530 15th Street, where her family made its home in 1907 and where she lived until her death in 1978.

Alma Woodsley Thomas was born to a black businessman and his wife, a teacher, in Columbus, Georgia in 1891. Her happy memories of her childhood there included the circular flower beds near their home, whose images were later reflected in some of her abstract paintings. In the interest of better educational opportunities for the children, who as blacks in those days could not even use the public library in Columbus, Georgia, the family moved to Washington, D.C. They settled in 1907 at 1530 15th Street, N.W.

Alma graduated in 1911 from Armstrong Technical High School, where courses in art, architecture and mechanical drawing encouraged the artistic instincts she had shown since early childhood. With a certificate received in 1913 upon graduation from Washington Normal School No. 2 (also known by its older name, Miner Normal School) she taught kindergarten at the Thomas Garrett Settlement House in Wilmington, Delaware, from 1915 until 1921, when she enrolled at Howard University in Washington. At Howard, Professor James V. Herring, whom she came to regard as a beloved and revered mentor, persuaded her to enroll in the newly founded art department. In 1924 she became the department's first graduate, and possibly the first black woman in the U.S. to receive a B.S. degree in fine arts.

In 1925 Alma Thomas began teaching fine arts at Shaw Junior High School, where she would continue to teach until 1960 (she is now commemorated at Shaw by the Alma Thomas Award for achievement in art, given to a male or female student each year by Midway Civic Association). During the summers of 1930-1933 she attended Teachers College at Columbia University in New York, and received her M.A. in 1934 with a thesis on marionettes. She returned to New York in the summer of 1935 to study marionette modelling with the world-famous puppeteer Tony Sarg. Marionettes came to figure in her activity at Shaw, where she organized the Marionette Club of Washington in 1934. Her students gave performances with marionettes she designed and made at home, presenting the art form to black audiences at a time when segregation prevented them from attending such shows at the National Theater.

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While she tended to be skeptical about the idea of a specifically black (as distinguished from African) art, Alma Thomas showed a lifelong sense of pride and responsibility as a black artist. This took many forms, but showed particularly in the programs she organized to make art and an understanding of it part of the lives of her students, as well as to raise their consciousness of the contributions of black artists. She aimed to teach not simply drawing and painting but the "art of living," a love of beauty that could be experienced and expressed in daily life, in the home and in awareness of art and culture beyond the child's immediate environment. To foster keener art appreciation among local black school children, with an emphasis on the art of Washington, D.C., she organized the School Arts League Project in 1936. She led the students on weekend visits to places of cultural interest in the city where few of them had gone before, such as the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, the Freer Gallery, the National Archives and the Corcoran and Phillips galleries. On Saturday mornings the students attended art history classes in the gallery at Howard University, where Professor Herring and curator Alonzo Aden gave slide lectures emphasizing American art and the art of the American Negro. In 1938 Alma Thomas organized the first art gallery in the D.C. public schools, hanging paintings by outstanding black artists lent from the Howard University Gallery of Art in empty rooms at Shaw.

Other organizations she founded to increase access to art in the black community, especially among the young, were the Junior High School Arts Club (1937); the Saturday Morning Art Appreciation Club (1938) and the YWCA Art Club (1942). With Alonzo Aden and James Herring she became a co-founder (1943) of the Barnett-Aden Gallery, one of the first commercial galleries in Washington devoted to modern art and also the first to hold racially integrated art exhibits.

Retirement from Shaw in 1960 did not slow her efforts to widen cultural opportunities for D.C. public school children. In 1962 she initiated the Beauty Club (with the motto "A Thing of Beauty is a Joy Forever"), bringing neighborhood children to Saint Luke's Episcopal Church at 15th and Church Streets (where she and her family were members) on Sunday afternoons, for music, storytelling, travelogues, and carolling at Christmas. When the Uplift House neighborhood center opened at 1502 Q Street in 1963, she began teaching creative arts in after-school programs for children there. In 1964 her pupils hosted "Paint for Fun" groups from all over town in the 1964 Youth Arts Festival.



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Throughout her life of teaching and organizing, Alma Thomas had continued to produce paintings and sculpture. From 1950 to 1960, anticipating the new opportunities retirement would bring for work at her art, she studied painting at American University with Robert Gates, Jacob Kainen, and Joe Summerford. Her career as an artist came to its height in the 1960s, at age 75 and after she had contracted arthritis that was to become a chronic affliction. She described to Eleanor Munro how she sat in her house, contemplating what kind of new works she might offer for a planned retrospective exhibition at Howard University in 1966:

I sat right down in...that red chair here in my living room, and I looked at the window...why the tree! The holly tree! I looked at the tree in the window, and that became my inspiration. There are six patterns in there right now that I can see. And every morning since then, the wind has given me new colors through the windowpanes.

The paintings that followed, modestly described by the artist as "little dabs of paint that spread out very free," went on exhibition at Howard University (1966 and 1975); the White House (Light Blue Nursery, 1969-1970); the Whitney Museum of American Art (1972, the first solo exhibition there by a black woman); the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1972, when Mayor Walter Washington proclaimed September 9 Alma W. Thomas Day in Washington); the Franz Bader Gallery (1968, 1970, 1974) and, after her death, at the National Museum of American Art, with a major exhibition in 1981-1982. That exhibition, aptly entitled "Alma Thomas: A Life in Art," went on to her home town of Columbus, Georgia, where it opened at the Columbus Museum of Arts and Sciences in June 19, 1982, with Mayor Harry Jackson proclaiming June 20 Alma Thomas Day.

In addition to these one-woman shows, she had taken part in close to 90 group exhibitions by the time of her death in 1978. A number of her paintings, placed in the State Department's Art in Embassies program beginning in 1969, were shown in American embassies around the world (Azaleas Sway in the Breeze, Bogota, Columbia and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Forsythia Glow in Washington, Monrovia, Liberia, and later in the Secretary of State's reception rooms in Washington; A Fall Garden of Mums, Lagos, Nigeria; Spring Awakening, Snoopy Sees a Day Break on the 4th, and Breeze Rustling through Fall Flowers, Rome, Italy; Stormy Seas, Canberra, Australia and Paris, France). In 1972, reviewer David Bourdon declared her "the undisputed doyenne of Washington color painting." And in 1976 she found herself the only living Washington artist to have a painting accepted into the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Red Rose Sonata).

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Alma Thomas is sometimes associated with the Washington Color School of abstract painters, who attracted critical attention as a group in the 1950s and early 1960s. Some of the leaders, such as Gene Davis, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, were her colleagues and in some cases her friends. She stood apart from them in her continued emphasis on the signs of manual gesture in the brush- or crayon-stroke, as opposed to procedures such as pouring or staining, or the use of masking tape to achieve geometric formality and mechanically controlled order.

The 1968-1969 Apollo Space Mission, and her fascination with space exploration technology, inspired a number of her paintings in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially the canvases which refer to the satellite Snoopy and the visions it recorded in photographs. However, in a statement introducing the catalogue of an exhibition of her paintings at Martha Jackson West Gallery in New York in 1976, Alma Thomas described aspects of her art and its principal sources as experienced on earth:

I am inspired by watching leaves and flowers tossing in the winds as though they were dancing and singing...some of these formations have tight, militaristic patterns...some are loose and floating...each group of my paintings differ in composition to reflect the changing moods of nature...they all illustrate my impression of nature in action.

Nature in action was especially part of her perception of Washington. Many of her titles reflect this: Spring Flowers near Jefferson Memorial; Aquatic Gardens; Springtime in Washington; Arboretum Presents White Dogwood; Washington Flowerbed. The designs formed by the leaves framed against her window pane and the broken patterns of light and shade the holly tree cast on the floor and walls of her house were integral to the development of Alma Thomas' art. The colors of the crape myrtle in the back yard garden also figure in her painting. The house where she lived and created for so many years is a landmark not only because it was the home of a major artist and devoted teacher, concerned with younger artists and with the city's children, it was also integral, in the visual experiences it offered her, to the very nature of her art.

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Alma W. Thomas. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, April 25 - May 28, 1972.

Atkinson, J. Edward, ed. Black Dimensions in Contemporary American Art, New York, 1971, pp. 112-113.

Bourdon, David. "Washington Letter," Art International 16, December 1972.

Foresta, Merry A. A Life in Art: Alma Thomas, 1891-1978. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1981. Published on the occasion of an exhibition at the National Museum of American Art, November 26, 1981-February 28, 1982.

Forgey, Benjamin. "Alma Thomas' Odyssey in Art and Life." Washington Post, Saturday, December 26, 1981, D-1 - D-2.

Forgey, Benjamin. "At 80, Life Can Be Beautiful." The Washington Star, May 5, 1976, B-6.

Fraser, C. Gerald. "Alma W. Thomas is Dead at 86; Widely Praised Abstract Painter." The New York Times, February 25, 1978, p. 24.

Glassie, Henry H. "Victorian Homes in Washington," Records of the Columbia Historical Society. Baltimore: Columbia Historical Society, 1963-1965.

Johnson, Ronald M. "Those Who Stayed: Washington Black Writers of the 1920's," Records of the Columbia Historical Society. Baltimore: Columbia Historical Society, 1980. Vol. 50, pp. 484-499.

Munro, Eleanor. "The Late Springtime of Alma Thomas." The Washington Post Magazine, April 15, 1979, 18-24 (from the same author's Originals: American Women Artists, 1979).

Thomas, J. Maurice. "Significance of the Areas Encompassed by the Historic District Application to the Culture and History of the Negro Community." Statement presented in support of an application for historic district designation, case no. 82-2, at a public hearing before the Joint Committee on Landmarks, Washington, D.C., May 10, 1983, 9-10.

The Washington Color Painters (Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, Thomas Downing, Howard Mehring, Paul Reed). Exhibition organized by the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, June 25 - September 5, 1965.