

Founder's Foresight Key to Courtlandt Place Preservation

By Sallie Gordon



**1. Entrance to Courtlandt Place, 1908
(Courtesy of Woodallen Photography, Houston)**

The early 20th century brought unprecedented growth and startling change to Houston. Population nearly doubled between 1900 and 1910. Seventeen railroad lines expedited 200 daily departures, and the financial center included six national banks. The Houston Ship Channel had become a reality, and the city's cultural stock rose with the establishment of the Rice Institute.

The chaos of burgeoning downtown Houston was spilling into the once tranquil neighborhoods of Houston's elite, and real estate attorney Sterling Myer saw opportunity. He purchased land for a residential development outside the city limits, which in 1906 was platted into a 26-lot neighborhood modeled after "residences of good class" on the "Private Places" of St. Louis.

Myer, an innovative man, had the foresight to attach six restrictive covenants to the deeds of Courtland Place. These covenants, written to protect the neighborhood's original character and design, have been crucial to the preservation of Courtlandt Place throughout the decades.

By 1912, 12 lots had been sold, six homes completed, and a structure for managing the affairs of the neighborhood put in place. There were no thoughts of the difficulties that would come to imperil the integrity of Courtlandt Place.

A wall goes up in Courtlandt Place

Tranquility was short-lived, however, when John Wiley Link moved to Houston in 1910 and soon began development of the area now known as Montrose. It was assumed that Myer and the Courtlandt Place trustees perceived Link's project as a threat to Courtlandt Place because in 1912 they took action.

Architect William Ward Watkin, best known for his association with Rice University, was hired to design a brick wall at the west entrance of Courtlandt Place to halt the flow of traffic from the growing Montrose development. (In 1906 Courtlandt Place had few neighbors and restrictive entrances were not part of the original design. Low-perimeter fencing was used for definition of the boundaries of the neighborhood.) Teas Nursery was hired to landscape the project. The estimated total cost of the project was \$2,020.



**2. Postcard image of the north side of Courtlandt Place with #4 Courtlandt Place in the foreground.
(Courtesy of Michael O'Conner)**

By the end of July 1912, construction was almost complete. Surprisingly, Link, the newcomer to Houston, was able to outgun the well-connected, established residents of Courtlandt Place. He persuaded the City that residents of his addition needed a clear way to Main Street. Courtlandt Place Boulevard should be condemned, and the wall must be torn down after standing for less than a year. Courtlandt Place had received a blow to its original design and purpose, as well as its prestige.

A Courtlandt Place resident mused, “It was a brilliant move because Link was able to have one of the most elegant streets in Houston as the entrance to his neighborhood.” By the eve of World War I, 14 homes had been constructed. The war slowed the pace of construction, but in 1920 Courtlandt Place still set the standard for comparison for other developments and remained a focal point for social life in Houston. Four more houses were completed by 1937, comprising the 18 houses of historic Courtlandt Place.



3. Courtlandt Place, circa 1920.
(Courtesy of Woodallen Photography, Houston)

Move to suburbs, social woes threaten stability

After WWII, most families were abandoning their city residences for the suburbs. Memorial was the hot spot. The prestigious close-in addresses were in River Oaks. The construction of

the spur to the Southwest Freeway destroyed the expansive east entrance to Courtlandt Place and parts of two lots – serious losses for the neighborhood.

As the decades advanced into the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps the greatest threat to the block-long neighborhood was the spillover traffic from the Montrose bars and X-rated activities of the period. “It was not unusual to look outside in the morning and see beer cans and drug paraphernalia strewn about and drunks asleep in the esplanade,” said one Courtlandt Place resident during this time. Another lamented, “I wish to inform you that, last night, one of the cypress trees in a pot, placed in front of my house at the main entrance was stolen. It takes a least two men and a truck to perform this act.”



4. Courtlandt Place circa 1920.
(Courtesy of Woodallen Photography, Houston)

Many began to speculate that Courtlandt Place, like many of the adjoining neighborhoods, would become commercial. There was discussion of the possibility of “updating” the deed restrictions to allow for the construction of townhouses. Despite the power of deed restrictions, preservation of a neighborhood is dependent upon interested buyers. Courtlandt Place was out-of-date, run-down, and vulnerable, and preservation was on few minds.

Formal association created

In the early 1970s, a few, but crucial to preservation of the neighborhood, number of families, recognized the allure of Courtlandt Place and became official residents. Realizing its deed restrictions were essential to the survival of Courtlandt Place, the new leadership met the multiple threats to the deed restrictions with aggressive counteractions. The solution to protecting the neighborhood from the unwanted Montrose intrusions was revisiting the actions of 1912. There was need for another barrier from Montrose in the form of a wall at the west entrance. Placing the neighborhood in the National Register was conceived as a vehicle for buying the street from the city, which would enable the street closure and be the first step in restoring the “Private Place” character of Courtlandt Place.



5. Number 2 Courtlandt Place.
(Courtesy of Woodallen Photography, Houston)



6. Number 17 Courtlandt Place.
(Courtesy of Woodallen Photography, Houston)

Conflict often is a partner of preservation, and the story of Courtlandt Place is no exception. A few feared that designation as a National Historic District would bring unwanted changes, and there was strong opposition and threat of legal action against those individuals involved in the application process. The emotions were extreme.

The project stalled for three years, but in 1979 eleven houses were listed individually in the National Register as a solution to the imbroglio facing the neighborhood. By 1980, Courtlandt Place was listed as a Historic District in the National Register. Courtlandt Place nego-

tiated the purchase of the street from the city, and the west wall was erected, providing much-needed protection. By 1988, the east wall and gates were in place. Courtlandt Place once again was a “Private Place.” This now historic neighborhood, with its important links to our city’s past, was on its way to becoming a model of preservation for Houston.

The Civic Association had no formal structure for decision making and fiscal management after 1925. It operated for decades under hip-pocket arrangements, later under loose rules of governance. In 1989, a newly structured Civic Association was born, but had no formal or legal structure. Payment of the maintenance assessment was optional, so long-range planning and improvement projects for the common areas were still out of reach. In 1992, Courtlandt Place experienced another cliffhanger as residents debated the merits of installing an organization that called for an enforceable maintenance assessment. Some saw this structure as critical to the viability of the neighborhood, and others were opposed. By a close margin, the new form for the Civic Association was adopted.

The scars of change are no longer evident on Courtlandt Place. Once, an example of country living, the neighborhood now sits between revived and bustling Montrose and Midtown. The strong sense of community that characterized Courtlandt Place in the early days is again evident, although in a form appropriate to the 21st century. The park-like common areas and the 18 historic houses stand intact, powerful reminders of the individuals who helped shape our city.

Sallie Gordon is the co-author of Houston’s Courtlandt Place, published in 2009 by Arcadia Publishing.