

News Release



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Magnolia Park City Hall, Playhouse Theater and Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House receive historic designation

HOUSTON, July 14, 2010 – Houston City Council designated the Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House and the Playhouse Theater as historic landmarks and the Magnolia Park City Hall as a Protected Historic Landmark.

The Magnolia Park City Hall and Central Fire Station building at 7301 Avenue F constructed in 1923 in a simple classical revival style is the only existing municipal structure of the former City of Magnolia Park. Magnolia Park was laid out as a park in 1890 on a 1,374-acre site belonging to Thomas M. Brady near the confluence of Buffalo and Brays Bayous, seven miles downstream from Houston, and was redeveloped into a residential community starting in 1909. The City of Magnolia Park incorporated as an independent municipality in 1913 and was annexed to the City of Houston in 1926. Though the earliest residents were whites, Mexican Americans from South Texas began arriving by 1911. Most of the new arrivals worked in jobs tied to the railroad and ship channel. By 1929, Magnolia Park was surrounded by refineries, factories, textile mills, industrial plants, and wharves and had become the largest Mexican settlement in Houston.



The Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House at 2184 Troon Road in River Oaks is an excellent example of the Colonial Revival style. The house was built circa 1938 by contractor Ivan Greer for Dean and Rosa E. Strickland. The house's most prominent resident was Lera Millard Thomas, who was the first woman from Texas elected to the U.S. Congress. Mrs. Thomas was the widow of Albert Thomas, who was the U. S. Representative from the Eighth District of Texas, which included all of Harris County, from 1936 until his death in 1966. After he died in office, Lera Thomas was elected in the special election to serve out the remainder of his term. Mrs. Thomas was also a consultant for the U.S. State Department Agency for International Development, a member of the Houston League of Women Voters, and creator of Millard's Crossing Historic Village, which preserves some of Nacogdoches County's most important historic structures. Ann and Edward Lasater, the second owners of the home, were the daughter and son-in-law of Albert and Lera Thomas.



The Playhouse Theatre, located at 4816 Main Street, is considered the first permanent structure in the United States built specifically for professional “theatre-in-the-round.” Constructed in August 1950 with an initial investment of \$100,000, the theater was the brainchild of William Rozan and Joanna Albus, who hoped to establish a professional Equity theater in Houston. Architect Benjamin F. Greenwood, Jr. designed the concrete block theater building. Although the theatre was considered small from a seating standpoint, it was actually the largest venue for a building of its kind in the country.



In its early years, the theater featured first-class, distinguished productions. Many noted Hollywood and stage actors graced the Playhouse stage, and playwright Tennessee Williams directed a play at the Playhouse in May 1953. Despite good reviews from the critics, high overhead forced the theater to close within two years. Purchased by the current owners in 1991, the theater has since been used again for live theatrical productions and comedy shows. In 2004, the current owners dedicated the theater as the National African American Museum, a facility for historical documents, events, photos, memorabilia, artifacts, historical newspapers, art pieces, and programs.

The Playhouse earned national recognition and sparked growth in arena type-venues and other theatres in Houston, some which still exist today. The Playhouse’s original marquee on the building and its preservation of the theatre-in-the-round concept is a reminder of its unique architectural and theatrical legacy in Houston’s history.

For information regarding historic preservation, go to www.houstonplanning.com.