

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Ben Johnston House

OWNERS: Robert and Bonnie Baldwin

APPLICANTS: Same

LOCATION: 3325 Chevy Chase Drive – River Oaks

AGENDA ITEM: II.a

HPO FILE NO: 11L249

DATE ACCEPTED: Jul-8-11

HAHC HEARING: Aug-17-2011

SITE INFORMATION

Tract 6, Block 13, River Oaks Country Club Estates, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, brick veneer single family residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Ben Johnston House at 3325 Chevy Chase Drive, designed by well-known architect Charles Oliver, was built in 1927 as a speculative home by the River Oaks Corporation. Oliver was the in-house architect for the River Oaks Corporation from 1926 to 1931. Eventually, Oliver would design 75 homes in the upscale River Oaks neighborhood in many styles including Georgian, Tudor, Dutch Colonial, Mediterranean and Norman. The Johnston House is an exceptional example of Oliver's work in the English picturesque style, with its half-timbering, high-pitched cross-gables façade, and massive chimney. The Ben Johnston House appears to have been the second house completed on Chevy Chase Drive.

Ben Johnston was a Houston car dealer of Ford automobiles and president of Johnston Motor Company, which was located at the corner of San Jacinto and McKinney. He and his family lived in the house for two decades.

The Ben Johnston House meets Criteria 1, 4, and 6 for Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The house at 3325 Chevy Chase was built by the River Oaks Corporation as a speculative home and completed in early 1927. It appears to have been the second house completed on Chevy Chase Drive; 3559 Chevy Chase was the only other residence listed in the 1927 City Directory when the Johnstons took possession of the home. The home received a lot of notice upon completion and articles appeared in both the *Houston Post* and *Houston Chronicle*. On March 26, 1927, the *Houston Chronicle* featured the home with a large photograph and the following:

“Ben Johnston Buys English Style Home in River Oaks; Architecture is Unusual – Hugh Potter, president of River Oaks Corporation, announced Saturday that Ben H. Johnston, President of Johnston Motor Company, has purchased an English style home at 3325 Chevy Chase Drive. This home is one of a number designed and constructed especially for River Oaks Corporation...The house is replete with unusual features, designed to enhance comfort and beauty. Mr. Oliver has contrived to achieve an effect of weathered beauty, as well as an abode of comfort and hospitality. Every room in the house is cross ventilated, and every important room is ventilated from three ways. Perhaps the most interesting feature is the unusual use of slate. The roof is of English thatch slate... slate lintels are used

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above the windows. The floors of the entrance hallway and of the south and west porticos are of real slate as is the open hearth in the living room...”

At the same time, the *Houston Post* ran the following:

“B.H. Johnston Buys Home in River Oaks – ... This home was one of a series designed by local architects and constructed for River Oaks Corporation...It was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Johnston before completion and has never been opened to public inspection. Since it was begun, it has attracted widespread interest throughout Houston.”

The large photograph presents the home as it looks today with one slight change. There is a one story entry vestibule that runs in a diagonal fashion. This entryway has been simplified over the years and now is flush with the home.

Benjamin Harrison Johnston (“Ben”) (1888-1952) was born in Fort Scott, Kansas and spent his childhood in Dallas. He started his career in Dallas working for a Ford dealership, and later moved to San Antonio where he had purchased his own dealership. He moved to Houston in 1918 at the age of 30 and purchased the Universal Car Company, which was located on Main and Dallas (the site of the old Foley’s). In 1933, he purchased the Roy Hohl Motor Company and renamed it Johnston Motor Company. He listed his business in the City Directory as an “authorized sales and service provider for Ford Automobiles.” He served as President of his company which was located at the corner of San Jacinto and McKinney. He belonged to several social and community organizations, including Houston Country Club, Oak Cliff Lodge #705, AF&AM of Dallas, the Scottish Rite Bodies of San Antonio and the Arabia Temple Shrine. When he died in 1952, he left behind his wife Helen and one daughter, Mrs. Mark M. Garnett.

The Johnstons lived in the home approximately 20 years and sold to Paul C. Harris in the late 1940s. Paul Harris remained in the home for about 10 years and the home is listed as vacant by 1961. A series of owners then followed including: Jane A. Goodrich (1968), James C. Shindler (1973), and Levi Laub (1980). The current owners, Bob and Bonnie Baldwin, purchased the home in 1999 from Mary Maher Laub, the former wife of Levi Laub.

The home was designed by noted Houston architect, Charles Oliver, who was the in-house architect for the River Oaks Corporation from 1926 to 1931. According to notes from Stephen Fox, Oliver was a native of Dallas and had previously worked in the architectural/construction firm of the Russell Brown Company, which constructed many stylish homes in Dallas and Houston during the first quarter of the 20th century. Oliver worked for the Russell Brown Company from 1916 until 1926, when he was hired away by the River Oaks Corporation. Eventually, Oliver would design 75 homes in the upscale River Oaks neighborhood in many styles including Georgian, Tudor, Dutch Colonial, Mediterranean and Norman. Some of his most distinctive homes are the Mediterranean style homes, of which approximately six are still standing in River Oaks. Some of Oliver’s houses include:

- 2203 Brentwood, 1925 (Mediterranean)
- 1903 Bellmeade, 1926 (Mediterranean)
- 2508 Pelham Drive, 1927 (Charles Oliver’s family home)
- 1528 Kirby Drive, 1927-28
- 1827 Kirby Drive, 1927-28

- 3394 Chevy Chase, c. 1928 (Georgian)
- 1925 Bellmeade, 1928 (Registered Landmark Home)
- 2007 River Oaks Boulevard, 1929 (home of Mike Hogg, developer of River Oaks)
- 3015 Del Monte, c. 1929 (Tudor)
- 2504 Pelham Drive, c. 1929 (Norman)
- 2141 Pine Valley, c. 1930 (Tudor)
- 3223 Chevy Chase, c. 1934 (Mediterranean)
- 3358 Inwood Drive, 1930 (Christie home)
- 1407 Kirby Drive, 1930 (Manorial)
- 2970 Lazy Lane, 1934 (as consulting architect to James C. Mackenzie with Birdsall Briscoe)

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Ben H. Johnston House was designed in an English picturesque style by Charles Oliver. Oliver was well versed in all the revival styles; this is an exceptional example of his work with English-style architecture, with its half-timbering, high-pitched cross-gables façade, and massive chimney. The house faces north on Chevy Chase and is sited in the middle of the lot. The house is faced in brick veneer that has been painted white.

The main massing is centered under a side gabled roof of slate that slightly overhangs the façade of the house. A massive chimney and two front gabled bays project forward from this main mass on the front façade. These bays are capped with front gabled roofs of slate.

The front facade of the house can basically be divided in to three parts. The eastern most part is under the main side gabled roof. On the first story is a tall two-part casement window with rectangular lights and transom, topped by a brick label mold. A two-part casement window with rectangular lights and transom is located under a overhanging eave of roof that forms a sort of decorative eyebrow. To the west of this section is the massive chimney. The massive chimney steps into a double flued chimney capped by two chimney pots. The chimney is faced in brick but there is no discernable brick pattern work to it. One the first floor, there is a small rectangular casement window built into the chimney. The chimney is taller than the house itself.

The second part of the front façade features the front gabled bays – an entrance bay and a projecting bay. The entrance bay features a massive batten front door with glazing. The door is constructed of vertical wooden panels. The window is covered with an ironwork screen. Bands of brick with a flat arched top surround the door creating an inset entry. A large entablature of wood with a flat arch surrounds the entry. On the second story facade of the entrance bay are two 8-light casement windows that are surrounded by thick wooden frames with a flat arched top. A rectangular attic vent is centered above this window in the attic story. The final front gabled section of the house is located to the west of the entrance bay and projects forward from it. This bay features a four-part casement window with 3-over-6 lights in each window. These windows are closely set and are topped with a brick label mold. The second story features half-timbering and another, larger four-part casement window with diagonal panes. These casement windows

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- (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;
- (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;
- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.

AND

- (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Ben Johnston House at 3325 Chevy Chase Drive.

EXHIBIT A
BEN JOHNSTON HOUSE
3325 CHEVY CHASE DRIVE



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EXHIBIT B SITE LOCATION MAP BEN JOHNSTON HOUSE 3325 CHEVY CHASE DRIVE

