

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Houston Light Guard Armory  
**OWNER:** City of Houston  
**APPLICANT:** City of Houston/ Building Services Dept.  
**LOCATION:** 3820 Caroline (aka 3816 Caroline Street)  
**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** N/A

**AGENDA ITEM:** I.a  
**HPO FILE NO.:** 06PL25  
**DATE ACCEPTED:** Sep-22-2006  
**HAHC HEARING:** Oct-19-2006  
**PC HEARING:** Oct-26-2006

### SITE INFORMATION

Lots 1, 2, & 12, Tract 3A, Block 9, Empire Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a 17,892 sq. ft. historic armory building at 3820 Caroline Street (aka 3816 Caroline).

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Houston Light Guard Armory is a two-story masonry building constructed on a raised basement. It was built in 1924-1925 and designed by renowned Houston architect Alfred C. Finn. The building is the second historic location for the Houston Light Guard, which was a local militia organized in April 1873 and which included many notable Houstonians in its membership. According to Dorothy Knox Howe-Houghton, the Houston Light Guard was an organization that shared many members with Houston's elite ZZ Club and provided a means for people too young to have served in the Civil War to obtain a military title. Captain James A. Baker Jr. obtained his military title through his membership in the Houston Light Guards. Baker went on to become a founding partner in the law firm of Gray, Baker and Botts, and his grandson, James A. Baker III, would become United States Secretary Treasurer from 1985-1988 and Secretary of State from 1989-1992. The Houston Light Guards also claimed seven Houston Mayors among their members. Light Guard member Thomas Scurry was Adjutant General of Texas at the turn of the century. The building has been designated as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark and also satisfies Criteria 1, 3, 4, and 5 for designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Houston Light Guard Armory was designed by renowned Houston architect Alfred C. Finn in 1924. Finn was the architect for many Houston landmarks including the 1929 Art Deco masterpiece Gulf Building at 712 Main Street and the 1938 San Jacinto Monument in La Porte. Alfred Finn was the preferred architect for Houston powerhouse businessman Jesse H. Jones. Together Jones and Finn left a lasting mark on Houston's skyline during the first half of the 20th Century.

The armory building was constructed by the G. C. Street Construction Company for \$83,970 and completed in 1925. The Light Guards moved in later that year from their old downtown location, which was at the southwest corner of Texas Avenue and Fannin Street diagonally across the intersection from Christ Church Cathedral. This building had been constructed by the Light Guards in 1893 and was eventually torn down to make way for the Art Deco Sterling building in 1931.

The Houston Light Guards were formed during the waning years of "Radical Reconstruction" which lasted from 1867-1870 in Texas. Texas had been the second-to-last southern state to be readmitted to the

# CITY OF HOUSTON

union in March 1870. The last vestiges of Reconstruction were dissolved in 1877 when South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida lost their reconstruction governments.

Prior to and during the Civil War, many local militias existed for the protection of Houston and nearby communities. After the conclusion of the Civil War, Reconstruction governments were installed in former Confederate states, including Texas, in order to assure that no new insurrections led by Southern sympathizers could take place. For this reason, armed militia groups were forbidden to organize. In light of this law, the Houston Light Guards organized shortly after the sympathetic Democratic Party took control of Texas in January of 1873. The Houston Light Guards formally organized under a City of Houston authorized charter on April 6, 1873 that was filed with the state of Texas.

According to Dorothy Knox Howe-Houghton, the Guards fulfilled an important social need. The Light Guards organization offered men who were too young to have served in the Civil War the opportunity to receive much coveted military titles. Originally the membership to the Houston Light Guards was a who's who of Houston socialite families. The organization's membership was formed largely from the ranks of former Civil War veterans and Houston's social elite. Their first Commander was Edwin Fairfax Gray, a Virginia native and an architect who had served in the Sumter Guards during the Civil War. His brother, Peter W. Gray, was a partner in the law firm of Gray, Baker, and Botts, which would eventually come to be known around the world as Baker and Botts. Gray's other law partners were fellow Light Guard member Benjamin Botts, who had been enlisted in the Bayou City Guards during the war, and Captain James A. Baker Jr. Unlike his partners Gray and Botts, Baker did not serve during the Civil War and instead received the title of Captain through his affiliation with the Houston Light Guards during the 1870's. Baker went on to become a founding partner in the law firm of Gray, Baker and Botts. Baker's grandson James A. Baker III would become United States Secretary Treasurer from 1985-1988 and Secretary of State from 1989-1992. The Houston Light Guards also claimed seven Houston Mayors among their members. Light Guard member Thomas Scurry was Adjutant General of Texas at the turn of the century.

The organization was well known for its showmanship during organized drills and participated in competitions held throughout the state. The Houston Light Guards services were used primarily for crowd control during local disturbances, but also served in posts outside of Houston. In 1898, they were called upon to participate in the Spanish American War and were one of the units mobilized for the occupation of Cuba. In 1900, the Houston Light Guards were mobilized to the devastated seaport town of Galveston after the 1900 storm.

In 1902, the organization was reorganized following an act of Congress that sought to bring the various local and regional militias in line with the standard regimentation of The United States Army. After this reorganization, the unit would be stationed along the Texas-Mexico border during 1913, 1914, and 1916 and was then deployed to France during World War I. After its service in Europe during World War I, the unit returned to Houston and reorganized in 1922. During the World War I and II years, the unit went through a prolonged period of change as it was merged with other units of the military. The membership began to change at this point. No longer the prestigious organization it had been in earlier years and with the very real possibility of active duty, the unit's socioeconomic makeup increasingly reflected that of the working class. The Light Guards would later serve extensively in Europe during World War II.

The Houston Light Guard Armory building was completed in 1925, and the outfit moved there from its former location in downtown Houston. The Houston Light Guard remained in the building until it was

deeded to the Texas Army National Guard in 1939 due to financial woes. The Texas Army National Guard owned the building until 1991 when the Houston Community College System assumed ownership. A Houston Community College library was proposed for the building, but never came to fruition. The armory was deeded to the City of Houston in 2001. Shortly afterwards, the Houston Hispanic Forum entered into a thirty-year lease agreement with the City of Houston for the historic armory building. The Houston Hispanic Forum has plans to renovate the building for a cultural center. A capital campaign is underway and the architectural firm of Cisneros Design Studio was retained for the work. The building was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in 1992 (marker #10697).

## **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY**

The Houston Light Guard Armory is a four-story brick, limestone, and formed concrete building. The first floor is a raised basement that houses the building's mechanical systems and other specific task-related work areas. The second and third floors are public areas and are considered the primary floors. A partial fourth floor houses a projection room. The building's red brick exterior rests on a raised cast stone basement floor approximately eight feet in height from the ground surface. The building's primary façade exhibits a centrally-placed masonry stair which leads to a small antechamber within a prominent projecting central bay. The entry bay is clad in red brick with contrasting horizontal bands of limestone. The projecting entry bay is capped by an open air veranda with decorative cast stone railing. The right and left flanks of the central entry are also of red brick. These are punctuated by rows of wood-sash casement windows capped by multi-light wood-sash transoms. The first floor, above the raised basement, features three large arched window openings with limestone trim and sills on either side of the main entry. The third story has ten window bays with squared tops that flank the central entry. Each bay contains one pair of wooden casement windows capped with a four-light transom. A horizontal brick band above the uppermost row of windows contains inset limestone medallions that bear the Houston Light Guard Armory crest.

The building's north elevation, which faces Alabama Street, features wood-sash casement windows capped with four-light transoms as found on the building's primary façade. Four large vertical windows allow daylight into the main ballroom space of the building's interior. These windows lead to two shallow outdoor balconies.

The building's interior is divided among four floors. The lowest floor, which is partially below ground, is visible from the exterior of the building and originally served as the working area for the building. This floor originally housed storage, a vault, mechanical rooms, kitchen, boiler room, showers, restrooms, and a locker room. These were once necessary for the daily operations of the Light Guards who occupied the space. The second floor, which is accessible from the main entry to the building, houses an assembly hall with raised stage platform. This commons/ballroom area has a large open floor plan that is constructed similarly to a gymnasium. Galleries flank the main entry. A third floor houses additional galleries on either side of the main entryway as well as a mezzanine that overlooks the commons area. The fourth floor is only a partial floor that housed the projection room for the assembly hall area as well as additional office space and restrooms.

The building is currently in a stabilized, but un-restored state. Years of deferred maintenance have led to roof leaks that have damaged some of the historic interior fabric. Exterior features of the building are largely intact with the exception of several missing wooden casement windows. The exterior surface will also require graffiti abatement.

# CITY OF HOUSTON

## Archaeological & Historical Commission

## Planning and Development Department

According to the Houston Hispanic Forum, the group has begun a capital campaign to raise the estimated \$2.6 million that will be required in order to rehabilitate the historic structure. When restoration work is completed, the historic armory building will house the Forum's offices. The building's ground floor will also house a library, classrooms, a computer room, and a kitchen. The building's main floor will house exhibit space for permanent and traveling exhibitions in rooms on either side of the building's main entry. The large commons area on this floor has a raised stage and will be used for theatrical performances. The commons area will be made available to the public for functions. It is estimated that this space will accommodate 500 people.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Olson, Bruce A. "Houston Light Guards", *The Handbook of Texas Online*; Texas State Historical Association in conjunction with The General Libraries at the University of Texas At Austin. c. 1997, 1998, 1999. Last updated Feb. 15, 1999.

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Wilson, Michael E., *Alfred C. Finn: Builder of Houston; A Catalogue of Drawings of the Firm in the Houston Public Library/ Houston Metropolitan Research Center*. Houston Public Library, 1983.

### **APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION**

#### **Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Protected Landmark.**

- (a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider three or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the Protected Landmark designation. If the HAHC reviews an application for designation of a Protected Landmark initiated after the designation of the Landmark, the HAHC shall review the basis for its initial recommendation for designation and may recommend designation of the landmark as a protected landmark unless the property owner elects to designate and if the landmark has met at least (3) three of the criteria of Section 33-224 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance (HPO) at the time of its designation or, based upon additional information considered by the HAHC, the landmark then meets at least (3) three of criteria of Section 33-224 of the HPO, as follows:



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SITE LOCATION MAP  
HOUSTON LIGHT GUARD ARMORY  
3820 CAROLINE STREET (AKA 3816 CAROLINE)  
NOT TO SCALE

