

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME: J. Robert Neal House
OWNER: Theresa A. and John P. Havens
APPLICANT: Theresa A. and John P. Havens
LOCATION: 2960 Lazy Lane, Houston, Texas
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: Vb
P.C. MEETING DATE: 1-3-2008
HPO FILE NO.: 07L192
DATE ACCEPTED: 11-30-07
HAHC HEARING DATE: 12-12-07

SITE INFORMATION

Tract E, River Oaks Homewoods, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic two-story, limestone clad single family residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The residence at 2960 Lazy Lane was built for James Robert Neal in 1933. James Robert Neal was at one time Vice President of the family owned Cheek-Neal Coffee Company, which would later be sold and become Maxwell House Coffee, and was Vice President of Second National Bank in Houston. The design of the house was the work of renowned Houston architect John F. Staub. John Staub is best known as an architect of single-family houses and is closely identified with the River Oaks neighborhood. According to Stephen Fox, J. Robert Neal was a client with "aristocratic ambitions" who desired a home in "pure Louis XVth style." The house at 2960 Lazy Lane is an especially important home which has been featured in many publications including: The Country Houses of John F. Staub by Stephen Fox, The Architecture of John F. Staub by Howard Barnstone, River Oaks Magazine (1941), the Houston Architectural Guide, and the American Institute of Architects Tour of River Oaks. The house qualifies for Landmark designation under criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The home at 2960 Lazy Lane attracted immediate attention upon its groundbreaking in 1931. Construction was completed two years later in June 1933. Initially, in March 1931, the Houston Post announced the acquisition of part of the lot with the following:

"River Oaks Estate is bought by J.R. Neal" – J.R. Neal on Wednesday purchased from Second National Bank, executors of the estate of H.M. Garwood, a two acre estate in River Oaks for a cash consideration of \$32,500, it was revealed in a deed of filed with the Country Clerk..."

Almost exactly a year later, in March 1932, a large photograph of the unfinished home appeared with the following in the Houston Press:

"Home with 'Skyscraper' Frame" –... The home, which with the land will cost \$250,000, has an "office building frame of steel and will contain 20 rooms. John F. Staub was the architect and contractors are West and Jensen."

Finally, in June 1933, the River Oaks Magazine "Home for All Times" carried the following:

"Mr. and Mrs. Robert Neal have moved into their new home. Their site comprises almost four acres at 2960 Lazy Lane. The house is the work of John Staub after the best tradition of the French Renaissance."

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The home at 2960 Lazy Lane was built by John F. Staub for James Robert Neal (1894-1939). J. Robert Neal was born in Fulton, Kentucky and moved to Houston when he was ten years old. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. J.W. Neal, came to Houston to establish one of the plants of the Cheek-Neal Coffee Company. The Cheek-Neal Coffee Company was a family concern co-founded by J.W. Neal and manufactured Maxwell House coffee.

Mr. Neal received his early education in the public schools of Houston, and later attended Washington and Lee University. He graduated with a B.A. in 1915 and went on to complete post graduate work at Wharton School of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania. He returned in Houston in 1916 to become a vice president at the family run coffee company. The company was later sold to Postum Corporation (later General Foods) in 1928 for \$42 million. The proceeds were divided among the Company's eight owners.

After the sale of Cheek-Neal Coffee in 1928, his father, J.W. Neal, acquired a substantial stake in Houston's Second National Bank. He became Chairman of the Board of Directors and made his son a Vice President. At the time of J. Robert Neal's death in 1939, he was an active Vice President of the bank and a member of the Board of Directors. Mr. Neal's outside activities included: President of the Houston Building Company, a director of J. Weingarten Inc., a director of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, a director of River Oaks Country Club, a member of Arabia Temple Shrine, the Houston Club, Corinthian Yacht Club and Cheyenne Mountain Club of Colorado Springs. Mr. Neal died at the age of 45 of a brain tumor while in Boston Massachusetts.

Stephen Fox prominently features the Neal home in his book, The Country Houses of John F. Staub. In particular, Fox explores the psychology behind the building of the home. Fox writes:

"Mr. and Mrs. J.W. Neal (his parents) were earnest and industrious. They were stalwart members of the Second Baptist Church and after 1928 became the primary benefactors of Memorial Hospital, Houston's Baptist hospital. J. Robert Neal's very different personality and ambitions were evident in the instruction he gave Staub, in Staub's recollection, to design a "pure Louis Quinze" style house. The Neal House, which was built between 1931 and 1933, by Houston contactors West and Jensen for \$169,659, would seem to have represented an unconscionable extravagance by the elder Neals."

Also according to Stephen Fox, "The Neal house and gardens were Neal's greatest achievement." The Neal home stayed in the family until 1954 when it was sold to oilman John W. Mecom. In 1997, the Mecom family sold to David Dewhurst, III who never occupied the home. The current owners, John and Terri Havens, purchased the home in 2001 from Lieutenant Governor Dewhurst.

According to the Handbook of Texas online, John Staub (1892-1981) began his architectural practice in New York in 1916. In 1921, he came to Houston to supervise a project in the Shadyside neighborhood, and went on to establish his own practice here in 1923. Staub is best known as an architect of single-family houses and is closely identified with the River Oaks neighborhood. His first independent commission in Houston was the River Oaks Country Club. He was then retained by the Hogg brothers to design two model homes for the developing River Oaks subdivision. As his career progressed, he was tapped as primary architect (with Birdsall Briscoe named associate architect) to design Bayou Bend, the home of Ima Hogg. Between 1924 and 1958, he designed thirty-one houses in River Oaks, in addition to making designs for homes that were never built, as well as designing renovations and extensions for existing homes. Outside of River Oaks, Staub homes from this period were built in Broadacres, Courtlandt Place, and the Fort Worth neighborhood of River Crest. Additional Staub homes may be found in Beaumont, Dallas, and Memphis, Tennessee, some of which are open to the public as museums.

According to Howard Barnstone's book, some of the River Oaks homes designed by John F. Staub include:

- House for Country Club Estates, 3374 Chevy Chase, 1924
- Joseph H. Chew House, 3335 Inwood, 1925
- House for Country Club Estates, 3260 Chevy Chase, 1925
- Kemberton Dean House, 1912 Bellmeade, 1925
- John F. Staub House, 3511 Del Monte, 1925
- Hubert B. Finch House, 3407 Inwood, 1926
- Bayou Bend for Ima Hogg, 2940 Lazy Lane, 1926
- Judge Frederick C. Proctor Home, 2950 Lazy Lane, 1926 (as associate to Birdsall Briscoe), Demolished.
- Harry C. Hanszen House, 2955 Lazy Lane, 1930
- John Sweeney Mellinger House, 3452 Del Monte, 1930
- Wallace E. Pratt House, 2990 Lazy Lane, 1931, Demolished.
- George A. Hill, Jr. House, 1604 Kirby Drive, 1931
- Robert J. Neal House, 2960 Lazy Lane, 1931
- Hugh Roy Cullen House, 1620 River Oaks Boulevard, 1933
- David D. Bruton House, 2923 Inwood Drive, 1933
- Clarence M. Frost House, 2110 River Oaks Boulevard, 1933
- Ravenna for Stephen P. Farish, 2995 Lazy Lane, 1934
- William J. Crabb House, 2416 Pine Valley Drive, 1935, Demolished.
- Robert Bowles House, 3015 Inwood Drive, 1935
- George S. Heyer Home, 2909 Inwood Drive, 1935
- Oak Shadows for Ray L. Dudley, 3371 Chevy Chase, 1936
- Tom Scurry House, 1912 Larchmont, 1936
- James L. Britton House, 1824 Larchmont, 1936
- Robert D. Strauss House, 1814 Larchmont, 1937
- John M. Jennings House, 2212 Troon Road, 1937
- Dan J. Harrison House, 2975 Lazy Lane, 1938
- Claud B. Hamill House, 2124 River Oaks Boulevard, 1938
- Edward H. Andrews House, 3637 Inwood Drive, 1939, demolished
- Rienzi for Mr. and Mrs. Harris Masterson, III, 1406 Kirby Drive, 1952 (S,R&H)
- House for Mr. and Mrs. Ben M. Anderson, 3740 Willowick, 1956 (S,R&H)
- House for Mr. and Mrs. George A. Peterkin, Senior, 2005 Claremont, 1957 (S,R&H)

In addition to residential work, Staub designed the parish house of Palmer Memorial Church, the Junior League Building, and the Bayou Club in Houston. His firm designed buildings for the campuses of the University of Texas, Rice University, University of Houston, and the Texas Medical Center. He was the primary architect on the John Reagan High School project as well. Staub, Rather, and Howze also consulted with Jim Goodwin of Pierce and Pierce in the new building and planetarium for the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:

The James Robert Neal house located at 2960 Lazy Lane was designed and constructed in the French Louis XVth style. The home is two stories with an attic under a high mansard roof. The plan is L-shaped with two wings connected by a pavilion on a diagonal axis. The exterior walls of the J. Robert Neal house are clad in Limestone and decorative plaster. The extensive use of scoring, quoining, and pilasters on the building are

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hallmarks of the Louis XVth style. Of particular note is the high relief carving in the pediment located above the second story windows located to north of the main entry on the building's primary (east) facade.

Windows are paired multi lite casement windows which lead on to second story balconettes situated behind shallow decorative cast iron railings. According to Architectural Historian Stephen Fox, the paired casement windows are of a smooth aluminum sash which helped to impart a touch of 1930's architecture while looking the part of 18th century France from a distance.

The home is situated on a two acre lot in the Homewoods section of River Oaks, and its gardens were originally designed by the Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts. The interior of the home features a Louis Quinze stair rail salvaged from France and two Louis Seize mantelpieces. In his book, Stephen Fox has written an extensive description of the architecture of the home which is quoted in this report.

The home was purchased by John and Terri Havens in 2001. At the time of purchase, the home had been vacant for several years and was in need of restoration. One of the issues which required immediate attention was the basement which flooded regularly (sometimes by several feet). The homeowners corrected the problem by restoring the French drain system which had become completely clogged. The basement now serves as a children's' playroom.

The 2001 restoration included: all new electrical, plumbing and HVAC. At the same time all bathrooms were renovated, and the kitchen was completely remodeled. Also during the time of the renovation a family room was added to the rear first floor with a second story children's study and guest bedroom located above. The rear addition is not visible from a public right of way and has minimal impact on the architectural integrity of the house.

The new owners have spent several years carefully restoring the historic home at 2960 Lazy Lane. In October 2007, the Havens family finally moved into the home after the completion of their five year restoration. The home is in an exceptional state of preservation and continues to be one of the signature homes in River Oaks and in Houston. Most recently the homeowners, John and Terri Havens, celebrated their home's restoration with a book signing party there for Stephen Fox's book, The Country Houses of John F. Staub, in which their home is featured prominently.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Thomas McWhorter, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Handbook of Texas Online, "Staub, John Fanz"

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/ft94.html>

Barnstone, Howard, The Architecture of John F. Staub: Houston and the South, University of Texas Press, 1979.

Fox, Stephen, The Country Houses of John F. Staub, Texas A&M University Press, 2007.

Fox, Stephen, ed., "Houston Architectural Guide", 2nd edition, American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter, 1999.

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Houston Chronicle, "Robert Neal Funeral to be Set Here", November 28, 1939.

Houston Architectural Survey, Rice University, 1980.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION:

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

- | S | NA | | S - satisfies | D - does not satisfy | NA - not applicable |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation; | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event; | | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation; | | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city; | | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | (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; | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present; | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride. | | | |

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Staff recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends to City Council the Landmark Designation of the J. Robert Neal House at 2960 Lazy Lane.

SITE LOCATION MAP
JAMES ROBERT NEAL HOUSE
2960 LAZY LANE
NOT TO SCALE

