

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Joseph Merkel House
OWNER: Thomas McWhorter
APPLICANT: Same as Owner
LOCATION: 416 N. Hutcheson Street – Second Ward
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: IV.b
HPO FILE NO.: 08PL54
DATE ACCEPTED: Jan-20-08
HAHC HEARING: Feb-21-08
PC HEARING: Mar-13-08

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 14, Block 2, Merkel's Third Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site is a one and one half-story, wood frame residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Joseph Merkel House, located at 416 N. Hutcheson Street in Houston's Second Ward, is a five bay Gulf Coast Cottage constructed circa 1860. Joseph Merkel immigrated to Texas in 1846 with his father and siblings. He was a butcher and livestock dealer as well as an influential member of Houston's sizeable German American community during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Merkel House was, at one time, at the center of a 101-acre ranch in Houston's East End. This large ranch was used as both a homestead and as a cattle ranch for the operation of his livestock and butchers business. Merkel eventually opened a portion of this property to the public as a privately owned park called Merkel's Grove. The use of Merkel's Grove as a public recreational area predated the City of Houston Parks system by more than two decades. The land and Joseph Merkel House were also used as the meeting location and clubhouse of the Houston Schuetzen Verein, which was a traditional German rifle and protection club. The land was eventually platted and subdivided as the Merkel's 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Additions by the Merkel family between 1896 and 1899. The Joseph Merkel House qualifies for Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation under Criteria 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6, as well as being constructed prior to 1905.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Joseph Merkel House was once a part of a 101-acre suburban cattle ranch owned by Joseph and Caroline Merkel. The couple purchased the land in August 1860 from Samuel and Mary Barron, who had used the large property as their homestead. The Barron family arrived in Texas as early as 1838 and were among Houston's earliest inhabitants. Samuel Barron was born in Maryland in the late 1790s and according to the 1850 Census, the first taken for Harris County, his occupation was listed as a "gardener." The Barron family purchased the land from James Reiley in 1847. The land was all of Lot 67 of the Samuel May Williams survey. According to the 1847 deed, Barron and his family already resided on the purchased property at a location near the banks of Buffalo Bayou. The property's modern day boundaries would best be described as beginning at the south bank of Buffalo Bayou and running south to Commerce Street. North York would be the modern western property boundary and North Drennan, formerly known as "Butcher's Row", would be the approximate eastern property line. In addition to the Barron family's large suburban property on the banks of Buffalo Bayou, they also

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owned an in-town lot at the southwest corner of Texas Avenue and San Jacinto Street, between Christ Church Cathedral and the Houston Academy, one of Houston's earliest private schools.

During the years 1854-1856, Samuel and Mary Barron sold a portion of their personal and real property, which included their town lot and twenty acres from the northernmost portion of their 121 acres. The twenty acres included improvements and it is assumed that the original Barron home was located within this parcel. It can be presumed that a new home was constructed for the Barron family between 1854 and 1860. The proceeds from these sales would have been significant enough to build a house in the style and size of the Joseph Merkel House, but there is no archival evidence to prove this correlation.

In 1860, Samuel and Mary Barron sold their house and the remaining 101 acres to Joseph and Caroline Merkel for three thousand dollars, which was to be paid in several installments with ten percent interest. On the same day, the Merckels sold their ten-acre homestead located near the present site of Elizabeth Baldwin Park.

The Barron family moved to the area of Second Ward near Frost Town at the foot of German Street (later renamed Canal Street) at Chartres. At this location, Samuel Barron built a one-room school house where he was the headmaster. The family lived in a new home constructed behind it. A 1933 Houston Daily Post article recalled the many generations of children that Samuel Barron taught at his private school on German Street, including children of the Bering, Ennis, Lubbock, Usener, and Lockhart families. Samuel Barron died in 1878. Neither the Barron schoolhouse nor residence at the 2204 Canal location is extant.

Joseph Merkel was born in Koblenz Germany on March 25, 1832. He immigrated to America with his father and four siblings in September 1846, and was admitted at the port of Galveston after a two and a half month sea voyage. The Merkel family was one of thousands of German families who immigrated to Texas during this time period, partially as the result of the German Adelsverein. The Adelsverein, a German social welfare group, sought to populate Texas with German settlers at a time when growing discontent in Germany made this a favorable notion. Germany was in a period of upheaval after emerging from its occupation by France as the result of the Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815) and followed by massive crop failures coupled with rising inflation during the 1840s.

During the years following Texas' acceptance into the Union in 1845, the population of Houston nearly doubled every ten years. The years 1846-1860 marked a period of substantial German immigration to Texas. Although Central Texas is well known for its German communities, the history of German settlement in Houston has been largely overlooked. It has been estimated that, at one point during the nineteenth century, nearly forty percent of the Houston population could claim German ancestry. Today, much of the surviving remnants of the German influence in Houston can be seen in Houston's Second Ward. Some of this influence can be found in architectural examples like the Merkel House and in vanished place names like the site of the Volksfest Park at the head of Sampson Street and Navigation, and the Houston Saengerbund, which had been located on Milby Street. Many of the street names in the Second Ward are named for prominent German-American families like Bering, Engelke, Fox, Freund, Rottman, and Schroeder. A Merkel Street exists one block south of the Merkel house in the center of the Merkel subdivision. Canal Street, one of the Second Ward's major thoroughfares was originally named "German Street," but was changed during the anti-German hysteria of World War I.

Joseph Merkel was a butcher in the family tradition of both his father and brother. He operated a stall in the city market located at Market Square in downtown Houston, and raised cattle at his Second Ward ranch. He married fifteen-year-old Caroline Krieger on December 20, 1855. Together, they had

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four children. For the first five years of their marriage, Joseph and Caroline Merkel lived on property near the present day location of Elizabeth Baldwin Park on Elgin Street. They had purchased the land from Henry Dechaumes, real estate investor and son of Michael Dechaumes, a Parisian born architect responsible for many of the Greek Revival styled homes in Texas. The Merckels sold this property in order to finance their purchase of the property in the Second Ward in August 1860.

In 1861, Joseph Merkel enlisted in the Houston Guards as a 4th Sergeant. The Houston Guards were organized on October 12th, 1861, at Turner Hall, for the protection of Houston during the early days of the Civil War. Turner Hall, which was an abbreviation of Turnverein Hall, was a hub of German-American society in Houston. The membership in the Houston guards was fifty men including officers. Another notable member of the Houston Guard was Peter Floeck, a relative of Joseph Merkel through marriage who would go on to help found the Houston Schuetzen Verein shortly after the Civil War. It is likely that the Houston Guards were never engaged in any of the battles of the Civil War as Houston was never attacked during the period 1861-1865. They did, however, escort the casket of Texas Civil War Captain Benjamin Terry of Terry's Texas Rangers when his remains were returned to Houston in December 1861.

Joseph and Caroline Merkel's marriage effectively ended in 1863 when Caroline Merkel and the couple's four children left their home and went to live in Bear Creek in far western Harris County. The marriage formally ended in divorce in May 1867. Two of the grounds for divorce, cited by Caroline, were Joseph Merkel's ill temperament and abusive language. In one such incident, Mr. Merkel is alleged to have called the plaintiff a "sow". Furthermore, Mr. Merkel was accused of living in an adulterous relationship with a Henrietta "Riecha" Schultz during Caroline Merkel's absence.

Caroline Merkel's attorneys from the law firm of Gray, Baker, and Botts made note of Joseph Merkel's estimated annual income of \$3000 from his butcher's business as well as other investment properties and an inheritance from his father's estate. The court found Joseph Merkel guilty of the charges brought against him and ordered a partition of Joseph and Caroline Merkel's community property. In addition to the division of real property the court awarded custody of their four children to Caroline Merkel, along with \$95 in monthly alimony to be paid by the father. Caroline was awarded the Eastern 47 acres of their 101-acre tract as well as half of their herd of 600 head of cattle. The western half of the tract was awarded to Joseph Merkel and is the same half on which the historic Merkel home is situated. Joseph Merkel married Henrietta Schultz shortly after the divorce from Caroline was finalized in 1867. Caroline Merkel was remarried to William Bohlae in January 1868. The Bohlaes sold their 47 acres over the course of the next several years while living in Washington County, and later settled in Houston's Sixth Ward at 2102 Lubbock Street.

Joseph and his new wife, Henrietta, continued to live on the western half of their tract in the Second Ward after 1867. The couple had three children. They prospered through their dealings in real estate, cattle ranching, and through Joseph Merkel's butcher shop. In addition, the couple sold portions of their 51-acre tract as well as other properties scattered throughout the city.

In 1869, the Houston Schuetzen Verein was formed and held its quarterly gatherings on the second Sunday of the months of January, April, July, and October at Merkel's property. The president of the club was Peter Floecke. S. Schrimpf was vice president, Fritz Durer was secretary, and George Schultz was the treasurer. Schuetzen Vereins, or literally "shooting clubs," were competitive rifle clubs which originated in Germany. These clubs used very specialized rifles in competitive marksmanship games. Typical Schuetzen Vereins featured shooting galleries with short stair-step shaped ramps from which the marksmen perched. Several members of the Houston Schuetzen Verein were influential German-American businessmen. The Merckels' connection to these influential people undoubtedly led

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to greater social involvement and helped to establish the Merkels as a prominent family in Houston's German-American community. A formal studio portrait of the Merkel family taken in the late 1860s or early 1870s shows a family of means dressed in the finery of the times.

The Merkels leased several acres of Merkel's Grove to the Houston Schuetzen Verein beginning in 1869-1870. An 1889 contract record provides greater detail about the relationship between Merkel and the Houston Schuetzen Verein. The lease agreement stipulated that the ten dollar annual rent entitled the Schuetzen Verein members to the use of three acres and improvements on the property, including the Merkel house, but the home was to continue to be used as the Merkel residence. Joseph Merkel operated a bar on the premises that served "such kind and class of refreshments as are generally and usually kept in a barroom." Also included in the lease agreement between the Merkels and the Houston Schuetzen Verein was the use of a ten-pin alley and rifle range located on the property. Elsewhere in the lease agreement it is stated that the property was off limits to "notorious characters, lewd women, and children under the age of fifteen." Although the sale and consumption of alcohol and the discharge of firearms coexisted peacefully for many years, it ended in 1895 when a member of the Houston Schuetzen Verein was accidentally shot while at Merkel's Grove and later died of his wounds.

Joseph and Henrietta Merkel opened Merkel's Grove to the general public in the 1880s. This early recreational area was in existence more than a decade prior to the formation of the first City of Houston parks. Due to the relatively rural location of Merkel's Grove and lack of named streets in the area at the time, the location of Merkel's Grove in City Directories of the 1870s and 1880s was given simply as "...eastern city limits 1 and ½ miles northeast of Harris County courthouse". The Merkels are not mentioned in Houston City Street Directories until 1870, when the city limits were extended eastward to encompass the area around Merkel's Grove.

In the 1870s, the Houston Volksfest Association opened up Volksfest Park on land adjacent to the western edge of Merkel's Grove. According to author and historian Sadie Gwynn Blackburn, the Volksfest Association was formed in 1869 and "A parade featuring floats and King Gambrinus, the German Bacchus, usually led the way to the fairgrounds." The adjacent Merkel's Grove and Houston Volksfest Park became such popular destinations that the Bayou Street Railway Company eventually opened a mule car line to service this location in 1889.

In 1895, the Merkel home and grounds were used for the wedding of their daughter Laura Merkel to C. A. Depenbrock. The event was memorialized in a formal wedding invitation. The Depenbrock family would later go into business with the Brand family to operate a dry goods establishment on Houston Avenue and to help develop the area to the east of what would later become Woodland Heights.

Joseph Merkel died in January 1896 of "pulmonary phthisis," a nineteenth-century term for wasting disease or tuberculosis. He was buried in the Merkel family plot in the newly opened Evergreen Cemetery on Altic Street. After Joseph Merkel's death, the remaining Merkel land, which constituted approximately 50 acres, was divided among the surviving heirs. The property was divided into three sections with the northern and southernmost portions being subdivided and sold. The heirs formally platted the land as Merkel's Addition to the City of Houston. Of the Merkel's Addition, there are three parts. The southernmost portion was platted as Merkel's First Addition and the northernmost portion was platted as Merkel's 2nd Addition. Henrietta Merkel continued to reside in the Merkel home located on the central portion of the remaining property that was willed to her. In 1899, Henrietta Merkel platted the central portion of the Merkel property as Merkel's 3rd Addition, which included the land between Bering (later renamed Navigation Blvd) and Fox streets and lots fronting on both N. Hutcheson and Rosalie (later renamed N. Everton St) streets. Today the area is still known as the Merkel's Subdivision and is stated as such in legal descriptions.

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Henrietta Merkel continued to operate Merkel's Grove until the turn of the 20th century and remained in the Merkel house until 1912, when she constructed a new house directly across Hutcheson Street from the old one. Henrietta Merkel sold Block 2 of Merkel's 3rd Addition, which contains the historic Merkel house, to August, Frank, and Theodore Bering in the same year. Henrietta Merkel resided in the new home until her death in 1920. The 1912 Merkel home was either demolished or moved from its site during the 1960s in order to make way for the widening of nearby North York Street, but the historic circa 1860 Merkel home survived, being just far enough away from the road widening project to insure its survival.

In 1923, the Bering brothers sold the entire block on which the Merkel house stands to Medicus R. Cobia, an investor and carpenter, for \$7,350. A 1914 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map depicts the house with kitchen ell located in the geographic center of the block in which it now sits and straddling approximately four lots. Also depicted in the 1914 map are four outbuildings located to the rear of the property, which backed up to Rosalie Street (N. Everton Street). By 1923, the Merkel house was moved forward from its former location at the geographic center of the block to front onto Hutcheson Street. At this same time, Medicus Cobia constructed other houses in the bungalow style on adjacent lots. Cobia chose to incorporate the already 60-year-old Merkel house into his new development of Craftsman bungalows. Cobia sold the lot with the Merkel house to Mary J. King and her daughters in 1923 for \$3,000, the same price paid by the Merckels for the entire 101 acres sixty years earlier.

Mary Jane King, nee Mary Jane Headrick, was born in Tennessee in 1866 and moved to Texas in the 1880s, where she and her husband, named Martin Luther King, settled near Georgetown. Together they had sixteen surviving children. The King family eventually moved to Houston where the couple soon separated. From 1923 until 1959, Mary Jane King and several of her children and extended family lived in the house at 416 N. Hutcheson. Mary Jane King was moved to a retirement home where she died in 1966 at the age of 100. Today there are many generations of descendants of the sixteen children of the King family who live in the Houston area.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:

The earliest known mention of the Joseph Merkel House derives from an 1863 Harris County District Clerk record detailing the divorce of Caroline and Joseph Merkel. When taking into account that few homes were constructed during the Civil War years (1861-1865), it is plausible that the Joseph Merkel house was constructed sometime between 1856 and 1861. However, no archival evidence has been found which proves a link between the current Merkel home and Barron family ownership.

The Joseph Merkel House is a one and one half story, wood framed home on a pier and beam foundation. The house features a gable roof with a full width inset porch. The house is constructed with heavy post and cross brace framing and fastened with mortise and tenon joinery that is pinned with wooden dowels. The home is one of very few extant examples of the Gulf Coast Cottage style of construction in Houston. This vernacular style of residential construction was prolific in Houston during the third quarter of the nineteenth century because of its simple design, efficiency of space, and adaptability to the local environment. Furthermore, the house type was easily remodeled or to which additions could be added. A simple two-room center-hall cottage could easily evolve into a four-room center-hall cottage with sleeping loft upstairs. This style of construction has its origins in 18th century Louisiana. Similarly styled examples can be seen from Central Texas to Florida. Most Texas examples and Anglo-built Louisiana Gulf Coast Cottages feature center hall floor plans, whereas most French Louisiana Gulf Coast Cottages were built with interconnected interior rooms without halls and the need for a centralized entry.

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The house features a steeply pitched gable roof with closely clipped roof eaves. A porch is inset beneath the roofline along the front facade and runs the full width of the house. The front porch is capped by a wide entablature that is supported by square wood columns. Three equally spaced gable roof dormers are located in the upper half-story along the street facing slope of the roof. The dormers are clad in beveled wood lap siding and each dormer features a single 2/2 lite, single-hung, wood-sash window. The dormers were likely added during a circa 1923 remodeling of the house and at the same time that several small Craftsman bungalows were constructed on either side of and behind the historic Merkel house. Archival evidence indicates the use of dormers as a common characteristic in many Gulf Coast Cottages as well as in other early Texas house types. Although many Gulf Coast Cottages were not originally built with dormers, they appear to have been common early additions. The dormers are now a part of the historic evolution of the house and are themselves more than 80 years old.

The exterior of the house is clad in beveled wood siding. The exterior cladding is punctuated by 6/6 lite, single-hung, wood-sash windows. The windows are of the plane rail variety and operate without the aid of sash weights and feature a flat rather than beveled check rail. The window sashes feature thin “gothic” profiled muntins.

The front façade is five bays in width and features a centrally located front entry door surrounded by a typical, Greek Revival-styled multi-paned sidelights and transom window. The front entry leads to a center hallway eight feet wide and thirty feet long. The entry hall terminates at a doorway, presumed to be the original rear egress from the house, that leads to the now enclosed side porch of a circa 1900 kitchen ell addition. It was customary during the nineteenth century and earlier to locate kitchens in separate buildings away from the main house to prevent the spread of fire and to cut down on the transfer of heat in the main living spaces. The rear kitchen addition is constructed in a style similar to the main body of the house and features a gable end with one window opening and 2/2 lite, double-hung, wood-sash windows on the ground floor and is clad with beveled wood siding as used elsewhere on the house.

The floor plan in the original part of the house follows the strict interpretation of Greek Revival symmetry. The center hall is flanked by two rooms on either side. The rooms to the north (left) of the center hall were likely bedrooms due to their lack of adornment. These rooms are sheathed in rough sawn wood planks which have been plastered and painted. An interior stair is located in the rear or eastern bedroom, and seems to have been constructed after the initial phase of construction but firmly within the nineteenth century as evidenced by its use of cut or “square” nails that waned in popularity after 1895. Architectural evidence also indicates the relocation of an earlier downstairs doorway to accommodate the new stairs during this same phase of construction. The stair accesses the upper half-story, which was commonly used in historic times as a sleeping loft for children. Eyewitness accounts of the loft area from the 1940s indicate that this space was a large open space with a finished floor but no partition walls.

The center hallway and two “formal” rooms located to the right or south side of the hall feature horizontal wainscoting of painted tongue and groove planks capped by a chair railing and decorative molding. Door and window surrounds in these areas are trimmed with a slightly different decorative molding from that used on baseboards and chair railing. The use of the wainscoting, chair railing, and decorative trim molding denotes these spaces as “public” rooms, as sleeping chambers and utilitarian spaces were often devoid of decorative detailing. Ceilings throughout the house are of painted tongue and groove wooden planks of varying width.

It is believed that the house was enlarged in 1871-1872. The names Allen and Hinkel were found painted on the wood sheathing of an interior wall. The pair was in business together as lumber

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merchants for the years 1871 and 1872. It is likely that the interior stair and other decorative embellishments, like chair railing and wainscoting, were added at that time. It is unclear whether or not the overall footprint of the building changed.

A subsequent building phase added an attached kitchen ell to the rear of the existing historic house. The kitchen ell is depicted on a 1914 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map and is constructed with modern machine-made “wire” nails, which became popular after 1895 and which are still in use at the present. The kitchen ell is believed to have been built circa 1900 with later alterations. Between 1914 and 1925, the side porch of the kitchen ell was enclosed to create the home’s first indoor bathroom. City water was not available to the area until 1915. Prior to that time, the household would have relied on the use of wells, cisterns, and an outhouse for sanitary purposes. Circa 1923, the home was moved approximately thirty feet westward from its historic location to align with the other new homes that would be built on North Hutcheson Street. In 1925, the Merkel home was surrounded on three sides by modest one-story wood framed bungalows that are extant.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Baron, Steven M.; Houston Electric, The Street Railways of Houston, Texas, 1996.

Depenbrock, Anne; Personal Interview and family records.

First Evangelical Lutheran Church Baptismal and Death Records.

Friends of Evergreen Cemetery; Interment Records.

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Handbook of Texas Online; Texas State Historical Association.

Harris County Deed Records, 1846-1930.

Houston City Directories, 1866-1960, Morrison-Fourmy Publishing.

Harris County District Clerk Records, 1860-1870.

Houston Daily Post, 1895.

Johnston, Marguerite; Houston the Unknown City 1836-1946; 1991.

Sanborn Map Company of New York, 1907-1925.

Texas Seaport Museum Immigration Database.

Washington Cemetery Historic Trust.

The information and sources for this application have been researched, reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented by Thomas McWhorter, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION:

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

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S NA

S - satisfies NA - not applicable

Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-229(a)(1):

- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(1);
- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event (Sec. 33-224(a)(2);
- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(3);
- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(4);
- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(5);
- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(6);
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present (Sec. 33-224(a)(7);
- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride (Sec. 33-224(a)(8).

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).

OR

- The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2);

OR

- The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3);

OR

- The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4).

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STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Joseph Merkel House located at 416 N. Hutcheson Street.

SITE LOCATION MAP
JOSEPH MERKEL HOUSE
416 N. HUTCHESON STREET
NOT TO SCALE

