

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Building at 1404 Victor Street

OWNER: Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc.

APPLICANT: Debra Blacklock-Sloan

LOCATION: 1404 Victor Street – Freedmen’s Town National Register Historic District

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: VI.d

HPO FILE NO: 08PL59

DATE ACCEPTED: Feb-29-08

HAHC HEARING: Apr-17-08

PC HEARING: Apr-24-08

SITE INFORMATION:

Lot 9, Block 3, Porter and Baker Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a one-story wood-frame structure.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Building at 1404 Victor Street in Freedmen's Town is a one-story, wood-frame "workman's" cottage built circa 1924. The cottage sits on the former homestead of Italian grocer, Antonio Tomasino, Jr., and is one of two remaining buildings constructed for Antonio and his wife, Rosalie. The second remaining building, the Tomasino House at 1514 Wilson Street, was recently designated as a City of Houston Protected Landmark. The cottage at 1404 Victor Street is listed as a contributing historic building of high significance in the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District, and is the only remaining architectural and commercial structure of its type.

For many years, the Building at 1404 Victor Street was used as a barbershop/beauty shop and residence. In addition to providing a means to financial independence, beauty shops and barbershops in communities such as Freedmen's Town functioned as sanctuaries and community centers for African-Americans, and provided a public space where women and men interacted regardless of class, education, or occupation. As a result, the shops became pillars of community strength and served as a secure forum for the discussion and the promotion of African-American political endeavors. The Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum Inc. purchased the property in 2004, and intends to renovate the cottage to house a Barber Shop Museum.

The Freedmen's Town community was settled after Emancipation and became a thriving center of black social, cultural, religious, and commercial activity through the first three decades of the 20th century. During this time period, more than 95% of Houston's first black businesses were located in the neighborhood. Almost 75% of the Freedmen's Town Historic District's buildings have been demolished, yet the district remains extremely significant architecturally and historically. Since most of the district's historic buildings have been lost, those remaining are even more significant today, and represent a strong element of community sentiment and pride.

The Building at 1404 Victor Street meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 8, and is a contributing building to the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District – all considerations for Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation.

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HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Building at 1404 Victor Street, built around 1924, is one of five structures built for Italian immigrant and grocer, Antonio Tomasino, Jr., and his wife, Rosalie, in the Porter and Baker Subdivision in Freedmen's Town. After the Civil War, emancipated slaves congregated in this area that was then located on the southwestern fringe of Houston. New subdivisions, such as Seneschal Addition (1848) and the Justin Castanie Addition (1848), two G. S. Hardcastle Additions, and three other real estate developments undertaken by William R. Baker, accommodated this settlement. As early as the 1880s, the district was referred to as 'Freedmantown.' In the early 1900s, Freedmen's Town encompassed an area bounded by Buffalo Bayou, Sutton Street, Taft Street, and Prairie Street downtown. Today, the boundaries have been reduced to Taft, Heiner, West Dallas, and West Gray Streets. The Porter and Baker Subdivision, originally known as Obedience Smith's Lot 30, was property that was part of a settlement from Smith's vast estate. James A. Baker, Jr. (grandfather of James A. Baker III) bought the lot from Smith's heirs and sold an undivided one-half interest to George L. Porter. Platted in 1889, the Porter and Baker Addition includes four blocks bounded by Andrews on the north, Wilson on the east, Bailey on the west, and Victor on the south.

Antonio Tomasino's grandfather, father, and uncles emigrated from Italy to the U. S. between 1886 and 1901. The Tomasino family first resided in New Orleans before moving to 1301 O'Neill Street in the Freedmen's Town community. In 1907, they began operating the Tomasino Brothers Grocery and Meat Market on their homestead. Antonio and Rosalie Tomasino purchased Lots 9 and 10 in Block 3 of the Porter and Baker Subdivision for \$850 from H. J. Simpson in 1909. As evidenced by a mechanic's lien executed on August 7, 1912, they paid \$1875 to William H. Chryar (1880-1940), an African-American carpenter, builder, and contractor from New Orleans, to build a two-story house, one shotgun house, and three cottages on the property. The two-story Tomasino residence had living quarters on the top floor and a corner grocery store on the bottom. Some of the intersections in the Freedmen's Town district were occupied by smaller, corner grocery stores attached to or built next to homes and operated by Italian immigrants. Over the years, these early Italian families came to own much of the land in the district, although their descendants have long since moved to other areas of the city. The Tomasino family resided in the community until 1944. Chryar himself lived in Freedmen's Town for about two years before moving to the Independence Heights community in 1913, where he too opened a grocery store. The cottage at 1404 Victor is significant both for its association with the Italian immigrants who built and owned it for decades, but also for the working-class African-American tenants who occupied the building.

The Building at 1404 Victor St. was constructed around 1924 as an accessory structure to the other buildings on the property. Though its dimensions are small, it served as a residence and barbershop for an African-American, James Williams, in 1924-1925. This building may have been one of the earliest barbershops in Freedmen's Town. According to the 1917 Houston City Directory, over thirty barbers lived in the community and worked downtown. The Coach and Organ ('Negro' spelled backwards) Barbershops were two of the first black-owned shops downtown. In 1928, another African American barber, Earl T. Randon, resided in the cottage at 1404 Victor for a year. In the years after, several renters moved in and out of the property. In 1954, Flossie Davis operated and lived in her Davis Beauty Shop for a couple of years. From 1960-1963, Faye Tarver resided and operated Tarver's Beauty Shop in the cottage. The cottage has been vacant since 1965.

In 1966, after Rosalie Tomasino's death, her daughter, Rose Anne Tomasino D'Armata, inherited the cottage. When the R. B. H. Yates Museum, Inc., purchased the property on February 14, 2005, the site contained this cottage (1404 Victor) and three houses (1406 Victor, 1512 Wilson, 1514 Wilson). 1406

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Victor and 1512 Wilson were destroyed by fire on February 28, 2005 and hastily demolished the same night.

Black beauty shops and barbershops in communities such as Freedmen's Town became pillars of community strength and organizational strongholds against racial segregation and discrimination. They functioned as sanctuaries and community centers for African Americans, and provided a public space where black men and women could gain financial independence in a southern economy geared toward keeping blacks subservient to whites. As a result, the shops became not only viable outlets for the entrepreneurial spirit, but also served as a secure forum for the discussion and the promotion of African-American political endeavors. They were one of the few places where African-American women and men interacted regardless of class, education, or occupation.

Almost 75% of the Freedmen's Town historic district's buildings have been demolished. Nonetheless, the historic district remains extremely significant both architecturally and historically. Since most of the historic buildings have been lost, those few that remain are especially significant, and are physical markers of community sentiment and public pride. Since 1996, the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc., has been an advocate for the preservation of the neighborhood's remaining historic buildings, as well as an advocate for education about the neighborhood's unique history and culture.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:

The wood cottage at 1404 Victor Street typifies the small, one-story, one or two-room commercial buildings constructed in the side or front yards of primary structures in working class Houston neighborhoods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sanborn insurance maps of 1924 and 1951 show this building to have been ancillary to a two-story corner store structure that once stood at the northwest corner of Victor and Wilson Streets across from the Gregory Institute.

The next earlier volume of the Sanborn maps, 1907, does not show any buildings on this two-lot site. The 1924 Sanborn map indicates that the building was used for commercial purposes, although the 1925 city directory lists barber James Williams residing in the building. The 1951 volume indicates that it was used as a dwelling.

The wood building is rectangular in plan, and is capped by a low-pitched, hipped roof with exposed rafter tails beneath the overhanging eaves. A single entrance door is centered on the narrow street front of the building. The cottage was built at grade on the sidewalk line of the property.

The Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum Inc purchased the property in 2004 and plans to use the site for educational and archaeological purposes. The workman's cottage will be restored and will house a Barber Shop Museum.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Harris County Contract Records, Vol. 30, Pg 551.

Harris County Deed Records, Vol. 192, Pg 7.

Harris County Plat Records, Porter and Baker Addition, Vol. 43, Pg 590.

Houston City Directories, 1925, 1926, 1928, 1954, 1955.

Immigration Log, 1903, for S.S. Carpathia.

National Register of Historic Places, Nomination Form, Freedmen's Town District.

Sanborn Maps, 1907, 1925, 1934.

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United States Census 1910, 1930, Harris County, Texas.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Diana DuCroz, 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:

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

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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).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the 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 Building at 1404 Victor Street.

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SITE LOCATION MAP
BUILDING AT 1404 VICTOR STREET
1404 VICTOR STREET
NOT TO SCALE

