

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Stokes-Farnsworth House

OWNER: Charles Sanders

APPLICANT: Anna Mod, SWCA Environmental Consultants

LOCATION: 1407 Kirby Drive – River Oaks

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: III.b

HPO FILE NO: 09L222

DATE ACCEPTED: Nov-25-09

HAHC HEARING: Dec-10-09

PC HEARING: Dec-17-09

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 3 and a portion of Lot 4, Block 34, River Oaks Section 1, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story brick single-family house and detached garage.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Stokes-Farnsworth House at 1407 Kirby Drive, completed in 1928, was designed by Charles Oliver, who at the time was staff architect for the River Oaks Corporation. Oliver designed over 75 River Oaks houses and was a master at early twentieth-century eclectic styles including Louisiana plantation, French, Tudor Revival, English Manorial, and Spanish Colonial. The River Oaks neighborhood, developed in the early 1920s by Hugh Potter and Will and Mike Hogg as a beautiful garden suburb removed from the haphazard development of booming Houston, remains the city's most prestigious neighborhood.

Notable residents of the house at 1407 Kirby include the first owner, Dr. Merle Benefield Stokes, and Richard Farnsworth, partner in the successful Houston-based construction company, Farnsworth and Chambers. Farnsworth and Chambers built many buildings in Houston and the Southwest, including the Farnsworth and Chambers headquarters at 2999 South Wayside, a City of Houston Protected Landmark, which housed NASA in the early 1960s and has been home to the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department for many years.

The Stokes-Farnsworth House is one of the best examples of the Tudor Revival style of architecture in River Oaks, as well as one of the remaining original River Oaks Corporation spec houses in the neighborhood, and retains its integrity of materials, design, setting, and workmanship. The Stokes-Farnsworth House at 1407 Kirby meets Criteria 1, 3, 5, and 6 for Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Architect Charles W. Oliver, AIA, designed the two-story house and garage at 1407 Kirby Drive in 1928 as a spec house for the River Oaks Corporation, where he served as staff architect from 1926-1931. The Tudor Revival style house is one of the original spec houses built by the Corporation, which created deed restrictions for the new neighborhood that specified that houses along Kirby Drive (formerly Reynolds Ave.) be designed in the English Tudor or Colonial Revival styles.

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Charles Oliver designed numerous houses in River Oaks, including 1903 Bellmeade, 1915 Bellmeade (Hal and Iley Nunn Davis House, COH Landmark), 2011 Bellmeade, 3217 Inwood Drive, 3358 Inwood Drive, 1708 River Oaks Blvd, 2970 Lazy Lane, 2149 Pine Valley Dr, and 3223 Chevy Chase. The house he built for himself and his family at 2508 Pelham Drive in 1927 received a Good Brick Award from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance in 2008, and the tree in its front yard is a neighborhood favorite.

The River Oaks neighborhood was developed in the early 1920s by Houston businessmen Hugh Potter and brothers Will and Mike Hogg, who purchased 1,000 acres with a vision to create a model suburban neighborhood. Houston's explosive growth in the early twentieth century, following its new stature as the headquarters of several new and soon-to-be-large oil companies following the discovery of oil at Spindletop and the growth of the Port of Houston, led the men to consider a well-planned and deed-restricted oasis separate from the haphazard development of the city. Landscape architects Hare and Hare of Kansas City were hired to design the master plan, which took advantage of the existing trees and imported thousands more, and laid out the neighborhood with curving streets and a northernmost section that hugged Buffalo Bayou. Because access roads into the neighborhood were unpaved and thus hindered sales, the developers convinced the city to pave thoroughfares from downtown to the eastern edge of their development. Hare and Hare designed the landscaped parkway completed in 1926 from Sam Houston Park to River Oaks, originally called Buffalo Drive and now known as Allen Parkway.

Deed restrictions in the new neighborhood included guidelines on the construction and renovation of buildings. The design for each house had to be approved by the River Oaks Association and meet a minimum price requirement of \$7,000. These deed restrictions are the parameters under which Oliver worked and crated successful house designs and sales for his employer.

The house at 1407 Kirby was purchased from the River Oaks Corporation by Dr. Merle Benefield Stokes (1880-1953) and his wife Eva Blanche (née Van Nuys). Dr. Stokes was born in Lebanon, Indiana, and attended high school there and Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind. He received his medical degree from Rush Medical College in Chicago in 1909. Following his externship at Presbyterian Hospital in Chicago and an internship at City Hospital in Akron, Ohio, he moved to Houston in 1910. He served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps at the base hospital at Camp Travis in 1918-1919. His wife, Eva Blanche, was also from Lebanon, Indiana. Dr. Stokes was certified by the American Board of Surgery and served as secretary of the Harris County Medical Society (1934-35) and president in 1936. The couple lived in the house until the mid 1930s when they sold it to Fry L. Luckel, an oil man, and his wife Eber.

In the mid 1940s, Richard and Dorothy Farnsworth purchased the house from the Luckels. Farnsworth was vice-president and partner with Dunbar Chambers in the successful Houston-based construction company, Farnsworth and Chambers. Farnsworth and Chambers worked on large-scale projects throughout the Southwest and Louisiana. Notable buildings built by Farnsworth and Chambers are found on higher-education campuses throughout the region, such as Tulane University in New Orleans, Austin College in Sherman, Texas, and the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. In Houston, the company's most notable building may be its namesake building, the Farnsworth and Chambers Building at 2999 South Wayside Drive. This building was designed

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by architects MacKie and Kamrath and built by Farnsworth and Chambers in 1957 as the company's own headquarters in Houston.

The Farnsworth and Chambers Building was built on 46 acres of undeveloped land near the Gulf Freeway and in the midst of the suburban development growing up around Gulfgate Mall and Palms Center. Long and low, with modern horizontal lines that seemed to stretch forever, the building's stonework is an almost otherworldly green. Farnsworth and Chambers did not enjoy their new building for long. In the fall of 1956, partner Dunbar Chambers, who was also one of the investors in the Sharpstown development in Southwest Houston, was accidentally killed while hunting in South Dakota. In 1961, the building was bought by W.D. York and Gragg Drilling and renamed the Gragg Building. NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center (MSC) was located in the building from 1962 to 1964 while the Johnson Space Center was being built in Clear Lake. When the MSC moved into the Farnsworth and Chambers Building, NASA's Mercury Program was already underway, and the remaining Mercury flights were planned by the engineers and scientists at the Farnsworth and Chambers Building. The building has served for many years as the headquarters for the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department, and was designated as a City of Houston Protected Landmark on February 18, 2009.

Although the Farnsworth and Chambers firm is now dissolved, many of the young men who got their start there went on to establish their own construction and contracting firms throughout the city and state. For example, Rice alumnus and former trustee Al Jensen began his career as a carpenter's helper for Brown and Root on the construction of the Rice Stadium. Upon graduation from Rice University, he began working for Farnsworth and Chambers. In 1957, he became one of the founders of H. A. Lott, Inc., a Houston-based construction company whose significant buildings include the Astrodome, The Summit (Compaq Center, now Lakewood Church), and San Antonio's Riverwalk.

The Farnsworths remained in the house at 1407 Kirby until the mid-1950s when they sold the house to Richard D. Rickett, the vice-president of Fish Engineering. In the early 1970s, the Ricketts sold to John and Emily Kilgore, and in 1976 the house was purchased by the current owner.

Charles Wesley Oliver

Charles Wesley Oliver was born in 1893 in Arkansas. By the age of three, his family moved to Dallas where he attended school. He graduated with an architectural degree from the University of Texas where he also played on the varsity baseball team that won the Southwest championship. During WW I, he was a captain in the 58th field artillery regular army and served at Fort Stanley in San Antonio and later Camp Jackson. At Camp Jackson, Oliver met Louise Hampton and they married. The couple had three children, Charles W. Oliver, Jr., Wade Hampton Oliver, and Eloise Oliver.

In 1916, Oliver joined the Russell Brown Company, a home building and contracting enterprise, and worked there for seven years before moving to Houston to manage the office here. After three years in Houston, he changed jobs and on May 1, 1926, Oliver became the chief architect and head of the department of architecture and building for County Club Estates, the first subdivision in the

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newly created River Oaks neighborhood. His consulting services were free of charge for any River Oaks property owner. Prior to Oliver's employment, this complimentary consulting service was limited to gardening. Once a property owner was ready to move forward with architectural plans and construction supervision, a fee was charged.

Oliver designed over 75 River Oaks houses and was a master at early twentieth-century eclectic styles including Louisiana plantation, French, Tudor Revival and English Manorial and Spanish Colonial. He was widely published in architectural magazines including *The Architect*, *Western Architect*, and the *Houston Gargoyle*. He left the River Oaks job in 1932 to open his own office in the Second National Bank Building. During this time he became the supervisor of home reconditioning for the Home Owners Loan Corporation and in 1935 was transferred to Dallas.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The house at 1407 Kirby Dr. is a two-story, modified L-plan building with the primary façade facing west onto Kirby Dr. The base stroke of the modified "L" plan is parallel to Kirby Dr. and the stem of the "L" juts out to the northeast at an unusual 45 degree angle. This plan was realized to take full advantage of the prevailing breezes and to stay on the high side of the small ravine on the northern part of the lot. The house remains in its original configuration with no changes, other than a screened porch being enclosed with sheet glass. Only the garage has been altered with an ell addition added to the north in the 1950s.

The Tudor Revival style house includes character and stylistic defining elements including the corbelled chimneys and cornice returns, half timbering, the mix of stone and brick on the main façade, the steeply sloping roof line of the front gable, the cast stone trim surrounding the entry, diamond-paned casement windows and the crenulated parapet roofline to the northeast of the entry.

The house is wood-framed on a pier-and-beam foundation and is clad with a mixture of brick laid up in a Flemish bond and coursed rusticated limestone. The limestone is prominent on the asymmetrical main façade on the steeply pitched projecting front gable. The windows are metal casement type with eight lights each and are typically paired. On the main façade, the metal framed windows have diamond panes with lead comes. The roof is slate shingles and the gutters and downspouts are copper. There is a stunning brick chimney on the northeast façade with a large corbelled cap detailed with a brick chevron pattern. The limestone of the main façade wraps around on the first floor onto the northeast façade where it then transitions to brick. There are a few haphazardly placed stones set into the brick near the crenellated parapet. On the ground floor end of the northeast wing there is a former screened porch that has been converted into interior space with single sheet glass inserted into the former screened openings. Upstairs, there are paired eight light casement windows with four light transoms set into the half-timbered and plaster exterior of the gable end. The rear of the house faces a terraced garden designed by C. C. "Pat" Fleming and has flagstone walkways outlined in brick. There is a small fountain with a semicircular basin with spiraled edges. Set in the rear intersection of the "L" is projecting, two-story bay window with a gabled roof.

The garage is set far back on the lot and faces west towards Kirby Dr. The original two-car garage was front gabled and almost square in plan with a small apartment above. An addition was added to

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the north and the upstairs apartment living space expanded. The original front gabled portion of the garage mimics the architectural detailing of the house, including the wooden clapboards in the gable, the limestone detailing at the cornice return, and the Flemish bond brick cladding. The side gabled addition was sensitively done and continues the wooden clapboards and the metal casement windows.

The interior plan is one room deep with oak flooring, nine foot ceilings and plastered walls. The former downstairs porch, converted into interior space, has the marble flooring and exposed brick walls. The original Tudor arched front door was replaced by a former owner and is in storage on site.

The information and sources provided by Anna Mod, SWCA Environmental Consultants, have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Diana DuCroz, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

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Farnsworth and Chambers Building Protected Landmark Report, City of Houston (08PL69), 2008.

Ferguson, Cheryl, excerpt from a research paper, <http://www.ropo.org/neighbor.html>.

Fox, Stephen. Houston Architectural Guide. Houston: AIA, 1990.

Harris, Cyril M., ed. Illustrated Dictionary of Historic Architecture. New York: Dover, 1977.

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Harris County Deed records, various dates 1920-1970.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee. A Field Guide to American Houses. New York: Knopf, 2006.

“Oliver to Serve River Oaks Areas as Service Head.” *Houston Post-Dispatch*, 9 May 1926.

“Oliver Opens Office Here,” *Houston Press*, 9 January 1932.

“C.W. Oliver, Architect, To Take Dallas Position.” *Houston Press*, 14 Feb 1935.

Web sites

Preservation River Oaks, <http://preserveriveroaks.com/homes.shtml>

River Oaks Property Owners, Inc. <http://www.ropo.org/neighbor.html>

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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 type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" 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 accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Stokes-Farnsworth House at 1407 Kirby Drive.

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EXHIBIT A
PHOTO
STOKES-FARNSWORTH HOUSE
1407 KIRBY



