

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Wilson G. Saville House
OWNERS: Christopher and Genevieve O'Sullivan
APPLICANT: Kelley Trammel
LOCATION: 3217 Groveland Lane – River Oaks
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: III.c
HPO FILE NO: 09L223
DATE ACCEPTED: Nov-4-09
HAHC HEARING: Dec-10-09
PC HEARING: Dec-17-09

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 6, Block 12, River Oaks Country Club Estates, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, wood frame residence with brick veneer.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Wilson G. Saville Home was constructed in 1933 and designed by prolific Houston architects Hiram A. Salisbury and T. George McHale. The substantial body of work created by these architects includes many homes in River Oaks, Southampton, Boulevard Oaks, and Shadow Lawn, as well as St. John's School and St. John's Chapel, which were designed in association with MacKie and Kamrath Architects.

Wilson G. Saville was a West Point graduate and served in the army in World War I before starting a career as a geologist and mining engineer. In 1925, he established the Torsion Balance Exploration Company which, according to the Houston Chronicle, was "one of the earliest geophysical consulting companies in America." Saville also served the Army as district engineer in Galveston during World War II and was later assigned to the operational engineering branch of Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces. Saville served two terms as Chairman of the Port of Houston Board from 1946 to 1950. Under Chairman Saville's stewardship, the Port of Houston became the second largest port in the United States in tonnage in 1948, a year when the value of cargo exceeded \$1 billion for the first time.

The Wilson G. Saville House meets Criteria 1, 3, and 6 for Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Wilson G. Saville was born on May 20, 1897, in Fort Sill, Oklahoma Territory, when it was an Apache Indian reservation. Wilson's father, Second Lieutenant Matthew E. Saville, was the army officer in charge of the reservation at Fort Sill. Matthew Saville established a close relationship with the famed Apache warrior, Geronimo, who was captured as a prisoner of war and taken to Fort Sill in 1894. Matthew appointed Geronimo the godfather to young Wilson Saville.

Like his father, Wilson Saville attended the United States Military Academy at West Point. After graduating from West Point in 1918, Wilson served in the army during World War I. His career in the

CITY OF HOUSTON

army was brief; he retired in 1920 to pursue a career as a geologist and mining engineer. He was employed by Phelps Dodge Copper Company in Bisbee, Arizona, in 1920 and then by Rycade Oil Corporation in Houston beginning in 1921. He stayed with Rycade Oil for four years and, in 1925, left to establish his own company, Torsion Balance Exploration Company, with which he enjoyed tremendous success. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, Torsion Balance Exploration Company was “one of the earliest geophysical consulting companies in America.”

In 1922, while he was building his career in Houston, Wilson Saville married Floy Barnhart, the daughter of Colonel and Mrs. George Barnhardt, the Colonel being a World War I army hero. The wedding took place on December 27, 1922, at the Church of the Covenant in Washington, D.C. Their wedding announcement was covered by the *New York Times*.

When the Savilles moved into 3217 Groveland Lane in December 1933, the event was documented in an article in the River Oaks Corporation magazine, “Homes for All Times.” The article read, “Mr. and Mrs. W.G. Saville are now at home in their new residence at 3217 Groveland Lane. They have an unusually large site, there being frontage of 142 feet and a depth of approximately 200 feet. The house was designed by H.A. Salisbury and associate T. George McHale.”

Wilson Saville enjoyed a productive career as a business and civic leader in Houston. He was asked to serve the Army as district engineer in Galveston during World War II and was later assigned to the operational engineering branch of Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces. Saville served two terms as Chairman of the Port of Houston Board between 1946 and 1950. The post-war years were particularly tumultuous for the Port of Houston. During the war, shipping had decreased from 28 million tons in 1939 to 15 million tons in 1943, a drop of almost 46 percent. Then, as the government acted to rebuild the “war-shattered economy,” the Port of Houston’s tonnage figures increased to 31 million tons in 1946 and nearly 39 million tons in 1948. This heightened demand created logistical problems as the Great Depression and World War II had postponed new construction and capital expenditure at the Port of Houston. The record tonnage overburdened the underdeveloped facilities of the Port, and authorities worked under extreme pressure to meet the immediate as well as long-term needs.

In 1946, as the newly-appointed Port of Houston Chairman, Wilson Saville outlined a bold plan calling for the expenditure of approximately \$37 million for Port of Houston improvements, including the widening and deepening of the channel by the federal government; the construction of two tunnels under the channel, in cooperation with local and state governments; the construction of wharves and other facilities in the amount of \$2.3 million; and the improvement of the publicly owned railway system. Despite the efforts of the Port of Houston, the program was impeded by a post-war building boom that drove up the cost for construction materials and labor, thereby making many of the proposed plans cost prohibitive.

Although the plan was not fully realized, many significant changes were made to the Port of Houston based on Saville’s original proposal. First, in 1947, the army engineers recommended that the channel be deepened to 36 feet for its entire length. Two tunnels were dug under the channel to handle increasing traffic. Once the two tunnels opened, two ferry boat services along the channel were eliminated. In 1950, a new fire boat was constructed in reaction to the 1947 explosion onboard the French-registered vessel, *S.S. Grandcamp*, in the port at Texas City, Texas, that killed hundreds of

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

people. Most notably, under Chairman Saville's stewardship, the Port of Houston became the second largest port in the United States in tonnage in 1948, a year when the value of cargo exceeded \$1 billion for the first time.

Wilson Saville died at the age of 56 in his home at 3217 Groveland Lane on February 14, 1954. Following his death, a feature article appeared in the *Houston Chronicle* entitled, "Col. Saville, Ex-Port Chief Dies." The article listed a range of associations, including River Oaks Country Club, American Society of Exploration Geophysicists, Houston Club, Ramada Club, Episcopal Church, and Eagle Lake Rod and Gun Club.

In 1989, Wilson's widow, Floy Saville, sold the house at 3217 Groveland Lane to Alan and Ellen Gover. Mrs. Saville passed away in 1990 at the age 93. The current owners, Genevieve and Christopher O'Sullivan, purchased the home in 2006 from the Govers.

Salisbury and McHale

Hiram A. Salisbury (1892-1973), one of the architects of the Wilson G. Saville House at 3217 Groveland Lane, was born in Omaha, Nebraska. Salisbury studied architecture under a fellowship from the American Institute of Architects and later graduated from the School of Architecture at New York's Columbia University (1913-1914). He worked as a draftsman for Thomas R. Kimball from 1910-1923 and George B. Prinz from 1923-1926. Salisbury established his own architectural firm in Houston in 1926, and he is first listed in the 1927 Houston City Directory with an office in the Post-Dispatch Building (later, the Shell Building) until 1937. Beginning in 1930, Salisbury and his wife lived at 3412 Yupon between Hawthorne and Harold, in Houston. By 1953, the Salisburys were living at 610 Saddlewood Lane. Salisbury continued his practice in Houston until approximately 1962, when he retired and moved to Medford, Oregon.

The second architect of the Wilson G. Saville House, Thomas George McHale (1903-1975,) was also born in Omaha, Nebraska, and attended school at the University of Notre Dame. After receiving his architecture degree, McHale became a draftsman for John Latenzer & Sons, where he worked from 1919 until 1923. In 1924, he worked for James A. Allen and Leo A. Daly. Starting in 1925, he worked for George B. Prinz for several years before joining Salisbury. Both Salisbury and McHale left Prinz's firm to form their own firm in 1927. McHale was married to Inez P. McHale, a celebrated Houston interior decorator. The McHales lived at 1106 Palm Street, Houston before moving to 2 Courtlandt Place.

Beginning in 1928, Salisbury and McHale collaborated on many projects together. Salisbury and McHale's projects included residential, commercial, and church buildings. Among their more notable projects are St. Stephen's Episcopal Church at 1805 W. Alabama (1941); St. John's School at 2401 Claremont (1945-49); and many of the homes located in River Oaks, Southampton, and other affluent Houston neighborhoods. Salisbury and McHale relocated their offices to the River Oaks Community Center at 2017 W. Gray in 1938-39, and moved to 3501 Allen Parkway in 1945.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Wilson G. Saville House at 3217 Groveland Lane is a two-story, wood-frame brick veneer residence with an asymmetrical floor plan. The house was designed by Hiram Salisbury and George

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

McHale in 1933. The front façade features an entryway framed by square pilaster surround and an entry porch. The home retains its original wood sash windows on both the upper and lower floors. The front façade windows are comprised of double hung wood sash windows with 6/6 glass lites and recently added arched bay windows, two of which enclose the partial width porch. The window lintels and sills feature a vertical brick pattern. The building features a steep pitch cross-gabled roof with medium shake shingles. Each gable end features brick that continues to roof ridge.

The house was not altered until it was purchased by the Govers in 1989. The Govers expanded the size of the house by approximately one third. The majority of the rear wing of the house is new space: the den and the master bedroom closet area, about half the kitchen and half the master bath, and the front hallway to the right of the front door, extending all the way to the wall, is new space, which expanded the front façade.

Additionally, the front porch was enclosed; the outside of the original house was substantially re-bricked and otherwise restructured and reinforced; the interior was substantially recreated, including installing new wiring, plumbing, flooring, and plastering. A porte-cochere was constructed which connects to the garage; the garage apartment was rebuilt; new landscaping was installed, including pools, decks, patios and porches. There was in effect no landscaping and little original yard when purchased by the Govers in 1989.

The current owners, who purchased the house in 2006, have completed a restoration that includes replacing the composite roof with medium shake shingle and the wooden fence along San Felipe with a brick wall; renovating the kitchen and adjoining family room, bedrooms and bathrooms; raising the ceiling in the front hallway; and replacing the heating and cooling systems. Although the house has undergone renovations, it retains the original massing and scale of the River Oaks neighborhood.

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

BIBLIOGRAPHY

New York Times, Wedding announcement, December 28, 1922.

Sibley, Marilyn McAdams, *The Port of Houston: A History*, University of Texas Press, 1968.

Fox, Stephen, personal notes and research about Hiram A. Salisbury and T. George McHale, August, 2006.

Fox, Stephen, *Houston Architectural Guide*, American Institute of Architects, 1999.

Houston Chronicle, "Colonel Saville, Ex-Port Chief Dies, February 15, 1954, Page B-5.

Houston Chronicle, Obituary of Wilson Saville, February 15, 1954.

Port of Houston Magazine, "Post-War Economic Boom," May/June, 2005.

Home for All Times, December 1933.

Houston City Directories.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

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 | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| <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 type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" 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 Wilson G. Saville House at 3217 Groveland Lane.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT A
WILSON G. SAVILLE HOUSE
3217 GROVELAND LANE



CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT B
SITE LOCATION MAP
WILSON G. SAVILLE HOUSE
3217 GROVELAND LANE
NOT TO SCALE

