

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: William Fairchild House

OWNERS: Andrew and Stacy White

APPLICANTS: Same

LOCATION: 2911 Ella Lee Lane – River Oaks

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: V.b

HPO FILE NO: 09L224

DATE ACCEPTED: Nov-25-09

HAHC HEARING: Jan-14-09

PC HEARING: Jan-21-09

SITE INFORMATION

Tracts 3 and 4A, Block B, Avalon Place Section 1, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, wood-frame, single-family residence and non-historic detached carriage house.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The William Fairchild House at 2911 Ella Lee Lane was built in 1936 and designed by architect Cameron Fairchild, William's brother. Fairchild designed the house in the eclectic style, incorporating Colonial Revival details.

Born in Waco, Cameron Fairchild began his architectural practice in Houston in 1925. Over the course of a long career, he became noted for his eclectic single-family houses in Houston neighborhoods such as Shadow Lawn, Boulevard Oaks, Braeswood, Riverside Terrace, and particularly River Oaks. Fairchild also designed or remodeled numerous public buildings in Houston, such as the Jesse H. Jones Library Building at the Texas Medical Center; the 14-story downtown First Savings Building; South Texas College of Law; and Trinity Church on Main Street. Fairchild was also very active in Galveston, where he designed many homes for the city's elite, and public buildings such as the seven-building student housing complex at UTMB. Beyond Houston and Galveston, Fairchild designed the Cody Memorial Library and the Lois Perkins Chapel on the campus of Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, and the Taylor Public Library in Taylor, Texas.

The William Fairchild House meets Criteria 1, 4, and 6 for Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The design of the house at 2911 Ella Lee Lane is attributed to Houston architect Cameron Fairchild. Although original plans have yet to be uncovered, three factors point to Cameron Fairchild as the architect. First, the home was designed for Cameron's brother, William Seley Fairchild.¹ In 1910, the Fairchild household in Waco, Texas, included parents, DD and Tyler B. Fairchild residing with children, Ralph B., age 19, Will S., age 13, and Cameron D., age 7. Second, word-of-mouth has passed down knowledge of Cameron Fairchild as the architect through a succession of owners. Finally, a smaller version of the house at 2911 Ella Lee Lane is located at 2529 Stanmore Drive. The house at 2529

¹ U. S. Federal Census, 1910

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Stanmore Drive is situated on a greenway court lined with houses, all designed by Cameron Fairchild in 1936.² The Stanmore Drive home exhibits a similar side-facing entrance, L-shaped floor plan, symmetrically balanced windows with double-hung sashes and 6/6 glass lites, accentuated front door, and brick chimney located on the front eave wall. It has therefore likely that Cameron Fairchild designed the house at 2911 Ella Lee Lane.

William Fairchild was born on January 12, 1897, and was five-and-a-half years older than his brother, Cameron. William was married to the former Mae Belle Allen. In September 1935, William Fairchild is listed in the Texas General Contractor's Monthly Bulletin as hiring J.E. Braunagel to build the house at 2911 Ella Lee for \$8500. Upon moving into the home in 1936, the City Directory listed Fairchild's profession as "Oil Leases" in the Second National Bank Building. Throughout his career, and until the 1960s, the City Directory listed his profession as "Independent Oil Operator." William Fairchild later retired to Comal, Texas, where he died on January 30, 1973.

William and Mae Belle Fairchild resided in the Ella Lee home for approximately six years. Subsequent owners included, Leslie Coleman (1942, Trust Officer, National Bank of Houston); Earl English (1945, engineer); Ralph K. Alexander (1955, Regional Manager Ceco Steel); Charles H. Herder (1986); Scott and Laurie Dorfman (1996); John and Linna Mooring (2003) and currently Stacy and Andrew White since 2006.

Cameron Fairchild

According to research by Stephen Fox, Architectural Historian and Professor at Rice University, Cameron Fairchild is best known for his eclectic suburban houses. Fairchild made his reputation in the 1920s as an architect of single-family houses. He designed suburban "country houses" in the Houston neighborhoods of Shadow Lawn (City of Houston Historic District), Edgemont, Braeswood, and Riverside Terrace. In Shadow Lawn, Fairchild designed the neo-Georgian style house at 4 Shadow Lawn Circle in 1927-28 for stockbroker Joseph C. Brown and his wife Elva Trueheart.

Fairchild was especially identified with River Oaks, where he designed the Clarence O. Lamberth-James Abercrombie House at 2221 River Oaks Boulevard (City of Houston Protected Landmark) in 1928, one of the first houses built on River Oaks Boulevard. Fairchild designed five houses that the River Oaks Corporation built around the first of the River Oaks Courts to be developed on Stanmore Drive in 1936. In addition to 2221 River Oaks Boulevard, Fairchild designed 2112 Brentwood (1934, City of Houston Landmark); 3244 Ella Lee Lane; 3320 Chevy Chase Drive; and the 17-story River Oaks Apartments (1965).³

During his long career, Fairchild designed many public buildings in Houston, including the Jesse H. Jones Library Building at the Texas Medical Center (1954); the 14-story downtown First Savings Building (1964; demolished 2002); and the remodeling of South Texas College of Law.⁴ He was also responsible for numerous alterations and additions to Trinity Church on Main Street, where he was a parishioner, vestry member, and senior warden.

² Papademetriou, 1999.

³ Riddle, n.d.

⁴ as referenced on the website of Spencer Engineers, Inc

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Fairchild also designed many buildings in Galveston. In 1928, Fairchild was commissioned by Mrs. Joseph C. Brown's sister, Sally Williams, to design a new house for her in Galveston. This led to a series of Galveston commissions from relatives and friends of Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Williams. Fairchild designed houses for Mrs. Brown's and Mrs. Williams' nephew, John Adriance II; Mrs. Williams' son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. John W. McCullough; and for Mrs. McCullough's cousin, W. Kendall Menard. These projects in turn led to commissions in the upscale Galveston neighborhoods of Cedar Lawn, Caduceus Place, and Denver Court and on the prestigious Broadway Boulevard. During the 1930s, Fairchild designed Galveston houses for George Sealy, Jr. (1930; demolished); Edward C. Michaelis (1931); Dr. and Mrs. A. O. Singleton (1931); J. Marvin Moreland (1937); Benjamin C. Levy (1938); Louis Pauls (1938); and Ballinger Mills, Jr. (1939). He remodeled and added to the Brantly Harris House (1939) and designed the modernistic style Windsor Court Apartments for Mrs. Hans Goldman (1938). Fairchild also designed the seven-building, student housing complex at the University of Texas Medical Branch (1955) in Galveston.

Outside of the Houston-Galveston area, Fairchild was responsible for the design and supervised the construction of buildings on the campus of Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, including the Cody Memorial Library (1939) and the Lois Perkins Chapel (1948).⁵ Perhaps one of the commissions most endeared to Fairchild was the Taylor Public Library (1959) in Taylor, Texas. According to the Taylor Public Library website, Fairchild was chosen to design the library “because of his high standing in the profession of architecture and because Taylor had been the childhood home of both Mr. Fairchild and of his wife, the former Helen Tarkington.”

Fairchild was born in Waco, Texas on August 20, 1902. He was educated at Southwestern University in Georgetown and the University of Texas, from which he graduated in 1924. From 1924 to 1925, he worked for the Austin architect George L. Walling. In 1925, Fairchild began independent practice in Houston. He took a brief leave from architecture to serve in the armed forces during World War II.⁶ Fairchild served two terms as president of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. He maintained his practice for over 50 years before retiring to Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where he died in June 1985.

River Oaks

When Will C. Hogg, Mike Hogg, and Hugh Potter began the development of River Oaks in 1923, they intended to make it into a demonstration of the highest standards of modern community planning, a role model for the rest of Houston to follow. Will Hogg's ambitiousness and Hugh Potter's skillful management of River Oaks during its first thirty years made the community known nation-wide as a symbol of Houston. Encouraging home-owners to retain the most talented architects in Houston (as well as several architects of national reputation) to design new houses, they succeeded in creating a large, professionally-administered residential community that demonstrated the potential for beauty in a raw and often raucous city. During the 1920s and 1930s, River Oaks was frequently published in national news, real estate, and design media, highlighting its planning standards, its residential architecture, and its landscape design. Since the 1970s, River Oaks has also been the focus of scholarly analysis in

⁵ Southwestern University, 2009.

⁶ Southwestern University, 2009.

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recognition of its significant contributions to the history of Houston and twentieth-century American elite suburban community development.

The creation of this type of subdivision was unique for Houston in many respects. The subdivision was laid out at, what was then, the far western edge of Houston. Prior to 1923, the majority of Houston's residential developments had occurred in a tight girdle around the downtown business district. As the sheer size of Houston increased, the demand for more neighborhoods grew along with it. Beginning in the early 20th century, the development followed a generally westerly and southwesterly expansion. The newer, more fashionable neighborhoods, such as Westmoreland (1902), Avondale (1907), Montrose (1911), Audubon Place (1906), Cherryhurst (1908), Binz and Southmore (1914), and Courtland Place (1906), developed along the Main Street corridor and to the southwest of downtown. River Oaks, however, was situated at the western city limits far away from other developments.

In addition, the developers broke with convention by laying out an organic pattern of roadways which lent a sense of spaciousness to the neighborhood, which was very different from the traditional Houston neighborhoods that followed a more rigid approach to development. These traditional neighborhoods used street grids which carved the land into predictable square or rectangular blocks. According to the *Handbook of Texas*:

“River Oaks is by Buffalo Bayou and Memorial Park in west central Houston. The residential garden suburb, which comprises 1,100 acres, was developed in the 1920s by Michael Hogg and attorney Hugh Potter, who in 1923 obtained an option to purchase 200 acres surrounding the River Oaks Country Club. In 1924 Hogg organized Country Club Estates to promote the development. The two developers retained Kansas City landscape architects Hare and Hare to provide a master plan that would protect the environmental integrity and natural beauty of the area. They also hired J. C. Nichols, who built one of the first major shopping centers in the United States, to serve as a design consultant. The master plan included homesites, a fifteen-acre campus for River Oaks Elementary School, two shopping centers, and esplanades planted with flowers. It called for underground utility lines, eliminated alleys, allowed only three intersecting streets, provided rigid building codes, and eventually banned all commercial traffic. Deed restrictions and centralized community control assured exclusivity; approval of house designs by a panel of architects and citizens and a purchase price of at least \$7,000 were required. A "gentleman's agreement" excluded blacks, Jews, and other minorities. The first home in the area, built by Will and Sue Clayton, is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Among the other notable houses is Ima Hogg's family home Bayou Bend [City of Houston Landmark], designed by John F. Staub and Birdsall P. Briscoe. In the late 1920s the development lost money, but by the late 1930s developers had invested \$3 million in the project, and the community had begun to influence development patterns downtown. In the 1990s River Oaks was at the geographic center of Houston. The community operated independently for three years, after which it was annexed by the city of Houston.”

The creation and implementation of the River Oaks plan went far beyond the layout of the neighborhood itself. The developers also needed to devise a clever way of drawing prospective buyers away from the more traditional neighborhoods located closer to the downtown business district. This was achieved in

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two ways. The first was to insure that proper roads connected River Oaks with downtown Houston. The second was to bring the amenities to the residents.

Beginning in 1925, work began in earnest on Buffalo Bayou Drive, which would later become Allen Parkway. Buffalo Bayou Drive was designed by the Kansas City architectural landscape firm of Hare and Hare. The thoroughfare, atypical for its time, was built to provide a reliable route by which River Oaks residents could get to their jobs in downtown Houston while simultaneously providing a pleasant driving experience. The street was designed to follow the meanders of nearby Buffalo Bayou and originated at the north entry to the River Oaks neighborhood. The entry was marked by grand entry gates designed by Houston architect John F. Staub in 1926.

The plan for the scenic drive began more than a decade before its implementation with the Arthur Comey Plan for Houston in 1912. The Comey Plan was a progressive and ambitious plan to guide the future of Houston's development, with quality of life issues as a major component. Parts of the Comey plan called for the creation of scenic drives, considerable park space, and linear parks along the city's bayous. Ultimately, only a small proportion of the components of Comey's plan came to fruition. Among these realized elements were the layout of South Main at Hermann Park with its prominent traffic circles, and Allen Parkway Drive with its adjacent linear park space situated between the drive and Buffalo Bayou.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The William Fairchild House at 2911 Ella Lee Lane was designed in 1936 by Cameron Fairchild. Its most prominent Colonial Revival details include symmetrically balanced windows with double-hung sashes and an accentuated front door. The house is of wood frame construction with brick veneer and cementitious siding, a recent alteration.

The house features a cross-gabled, normally sloped roof with slight eave overhang with boxed eaves. The cornice is emphasized with dentils. The front elevation is asymmetrical resulting from a cross-gable that projects outward, creating a T-shaped ground plan. The front entrance is located on the east elevation of the forward projecting cross-gable. The front door is glass paneled and is flanked by pilasters. The front door is capped by an entablature adorned with dentils in frieze. The entablature is supported by single-story, square pilasters. There are gabled dormers above and opposite the front entrance. The front elevation features rectangular, double hung, wood sash windows with 6/6 glass lights. The windows are flanked by hinged shutters and are accentuated by a short entablature displaying dentils in frieze. A brick chimney is prominently featured on the front eave wall

In 2006, the current owners undertook a major restoration and expansion of the home. The work included replacing the windows, siding, and insulation, and updating the plumbing, ductwork, HVAC, and wiring. The carriage house at the rear of the property was replaced with an appropriate reproduction. A master bedroom suite, sitting room and bathroom were added to the rear of the house. A sympathetic addition was installed on the east elevation which comprises a family/TV room, laundry room, and outdoor kitchen area. This addition is set back from the façade and is marginally visible from the public right-of-way. The façade of the home did not change during the restoration.

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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

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Don Riddle, *River Oaks: A Pictorial Presentation of Houston's Residential Park* (Houston: River Oaks Corporation, n.d.).

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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"/> | | | |
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- (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;
- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;
- (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;
- (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;

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- (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;
- (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;
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;
- (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 William Fairchild House at 2911 Ella Lee Lane.

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EXHIBIT A
WILLIAM FAIRCHILD HOUSE
2911 ELLA LEE LANE



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EXHIBIT B
SITE LOCATION MAP
WILLIAM FAIRCHILD HOUSE
2911 ELLA LEE LANE
NOT TO SCALE

