

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Cleveland Sewall House
OWNER: Bailey Q. Daniel Trust
APPLICANT: Meg Goodman
LOCATION: 3456 Inwood Drive – River Oaks
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: V
HPO FILE NO: 09PL75
DATE ACCEPTED: Dec-21-08
HAHC HEARING: Jan-15-09
PC HEARING: Jan-22-09

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 4, Block 1, River Oaks Country Club Estates (second amendment), City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site includes a two-story house.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The residence at 3456 Inwood Drive was built in 1926 for Mr. and Mrs. Cleveland Sewall. The house was designed by Ralph Adams Cram of Cram & Ferguson, a nationally recognized Boston architectural firm. The home is a representation of an unusual example of the Spanish Revival style. Stephen Fox describes Ralph Adams Cram as “best known as a champion of the revival of Gothic architecture.” The Ralph Adams Cram buildings in Houston include the Julia Ideson Building, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, and several buildings at Rice University. Nationally, Cram designed part of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, the graduate school and chapel at Princeton University and buildings at Williams College, Phillips Exeter Academy and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. For seven years, he served as the head of the Department of Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and served as the Chairman of the Boston City Planning Board. The Cleveland Sewall Home has been featured in numerous books and articles and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.

William Cleveland Sewall was president of the family grocery business, Gordon Sewall & Company. When he died in 1942, his wife, Blanche Harding Sewall, donated funds to construct the Cleveland Sewall Hall at Rice University. Mrs. Sewall was also a founding member of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Upon her death in 1973, she left a large gift to Rice University that included the Inwood home and provided for the Andrew Hays Buchanan Professorship and the Noah Harding Professorship. Mrs. Sewall was awarded Rice’s Gold Medal posthumously in 1973.

The Cleveland Sewall House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 for City Landmark Designation as well as being listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places and therefore meets Criteria for Protected Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

River Oaks

When Will C. Hogg, Mike Hogg, and Hugh Potter began the development of River Oaks in 1923, it was with the intention of making 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 constantly 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 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, 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 up into predictable square or rectangular blocks. According to the Texas State History Association's 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

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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 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.

3456 Inwood Drive

During the construction of the home at 3456 Inwood Drive, it received attention and appeared as news in local newspapers several times. On December 21, 1924, the Houston Chronicle announced:

“...Construction is going ahead on several new homes in the estates, among the latest is one being erected at a cost of approximately \$140,000. Plans were drawn for this residence by Cram & Ferguson, nationally known architects...”

Later, on January 11, 1925, the Chronicle reported:

“More than half of the home sites in River Oaks have been sold and construction has begun on many of them. Among those who are already building are William Clayton, Blakely Smith, William Buhman and Cleveland Sewall...”

On April 11, 1926, the Chronicle ran a large glossy section entitled “River Oaks Pictorial” that featured a large photograph of the Cleveland Sewall Home in the middle of construction:

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“Out of the welter of implements and materials and adroitly placed among carefully protected trees, a beautiful new home is rising to completion for Mr. and Mrs. Cleveland Sewall on Inwood Drive.

The Cleveland Sewall home, pictured above, was designed by Ralph Adams Cram, famous Boston architect, of the firm Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, international authority on matters of Gothic architecture, and architect of Rice Institute and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York.”

William Cleveland Sewall was born on July 29, 1881 in Houston to Edward Wales Sewall and Gabriella Harriet (“Ella”) Campbell. Mr. Sewall attended University of the South and graduated from University of Texas law school. Around 1911, he married Blanche Harding Sewall, a driving force behind the construction of the home on Inwood Drive. At the outset of his career, William Sewall practiced law. However, when his father died, he became involved with the family grocery business, Gordon Sewall & Company. In 1925, at the time of the building of the home on Inwood, Mr. Sewall was listed in the Houston City Directories as President of Gordon Sewall & Company, Wholesale Grocers and Cotton Factors, Coffee Roasters, Packers and Cannery with offices at 102-112 San Jacinto.

Blanche Harding Sewall was born in 1889 to Hallock Harding and Kate Buchanan. She was a native of Fort Worth and attended Rice Institute with the class of 1917. A family website described her as “an artist, philanthropist and, as a patron of the arts, a founding member of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.” She was a co-author of the first edition of "A Garden Book for Houston" which continues to be reedited and published today. Blanche assumed control of part of her husband’s business, then Carson Sewall & Co. Marine Division, upon his death. As a memorial to her husband, she donated funds to construct Cleveland Sewall Hall at Rice University. Upon her death in 1973, she left a large gift to Rice University that included the Inwood home and provided for the Andrew Hays Buchanan Professorship and the Noah Harding Professorship. Mrs. Sewall was awarded Rice’s Gold Medal posthumously in 1973.

Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942), along with Stayton Nunn, designed the Spanish style home for Mr. and Mrs. Sewall at 3456 Inwood Drive. Ralph Adams Cram was born in Hampton Falls, New Hampshire in 1863. His career in architecture was long and illustrious, first as a member of Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson (until 1914) and later as a member of Cram & Ferguson. Stephen Fox describes him as “best known as a champion of the revival of Gothic architecture.” His career included many works in this neo-Gothic style including: part of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City; the graduate school and chapel at Princeton; buildings at Williams College; Phillips Exeter Academy; and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. For seven years, he served as the head of the Department of Architecture at Michigan Institute of Technology (MIT) and served as the Chairman of the Boston City Planning Board. His career has been well-chronicled through several books including a two-volume series by Douglass Shand-Tucci, entitled *Boston Bohemia, 1881–1900* and *An Architect’s Four Quests – Medieval, Modernist, American, Ecumenical*.

Cram’s national stature led to the commission in 1909 to plan the campus of William Marsh Rice Institute. According to Stephen Fox, the Ralph Adams Cram designed buildings in Houston include:

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- Julia Ideson Building, Houston Public Library, 500 McKinney Avenue (1926), C&F, William Ward Watkin and Louis A. Glover (City of Houston Protected Landmark)
- Trinity Church, 3415 Main Street (1919), C&F and William Ward Watkin
- Museum of Fine Arts Houston (1924, 1926), Ralph Adams Cram as consulting architect to William Ward Watkin
- Autry House, 6265 Main Boulevard (1921), C&F and William Ward Watkin
- Rice University, Mechanical Laboratory and Power House (1912), C,G & F
- Rice University, Administration Building (now Lovett Hall) (1912), C,G&F
- Rice University, Institute Commons & South Hall (now Baker College & Will Rice College) (1912),C,G&F
- Rice University, Physics Building (1914), C,G&F
- Rice University, Chemistry Building (1925), C&F and William Ward Watkin
- Granite base for Statue of William Marsh Rice, Rice University, (1930), C&F

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The house located at 3456 Inwood Drive was designed by Cram & Ferguson 1926 with Stayton Nunn, a well-known Houston architect, serving as supervising architect for the construction of the home. The home was designed in the Spanish Revival style. As mentioned above, Mrs. Sewall was so impressed by Ralph Adams Crams' buildings at Rice University that she commissioned him to design the home for her and her husband. According to Stephen Fox, from architectural drawings found in Mrs. Sewall's house after her death, and now deposited in the Woodson Research Center of the Fondren Library at Rice University, it is clear that the design of the house was based on sketches she made. She took two alternative designs to Cram, one for a Venetian house, the other for a Spanish Revival house. Cram developed the Spanish alternative, remaining faithful to the basic formal and spatial characteristics of her design. As such, her personality is permanently imprinted on the home as she was the originator of its rambling style.

Mrs. Sewall based the interior design of the home on the House of El Greco Museum Building in Toledo and traveled to Spain to acquire artifacts and furniture. The National Register report written in the 1970s described the home's Spanish influence:

“Superb detailing in the form of decorative tiles from Spain, Churrigueresque plaster ornamentation over the stair alcove, massive oak doors with iron plates, and a heavily beamed ceiling further adorn this room. The drawing room is several feet lower in elevation than the entrance hall and measures twenty by thirty feet. A massively beamed ceiling dominates the lightness of the plaster walls and wide planked oak floor. ... The dining room measures twenty by twenty feet and is dominated by an exquisitely detailed fountain. Decorative tiles from Spain are used for the wainscoting and the interior of the fountain alcove. A window alcove is the focal point of the east wall while the west wall has doorways leading into the drawing room and open terrace with a fireplace between.”

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- (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;
- (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.

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)).

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 Cleveland Sewall House at 3456 Inwood Drive.

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CLEVELAND SEWALL HOUSE 3456 INWOOD DRIVE



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**SITE LOCATION MAP
CLEVELAND SEWALL HOUSE
3456 INWOOD DRIVE
NOT TO SCALE**

