

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Hilliard House
OWNER: Lydia Caffery Hilliard
APPLICANT: Same
LOCATION: 3375 Del Monte - River Oaks
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: Va
HPO FILE NO: 10PL92
DATE ACCEPTED: April 7, 2010
HAHC HEARING: June 17, 2010
PC HEARING: June 24, 2010

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 3, Block 8, River Oaks Country Club Estates, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, wood frame clad in brick, single family residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Hilliard House at 3375 Del Monte Drive, located in the original section of River Oaks, is an excellent example of the Tudor Revival style. The house features a steeply pitched side-gabled roof, chimney with decorative chimney pots, and decorated vergeboards over the gabled entryway. The house was built by contractor J. Leon Osborn in 1935-36 on speculation and was purchased by Harry and Susan Hilliard in July 1936. Harry Hilliard was a prominent Houstonian and one of the principals of Adams & Porter, an international marine insurance firm based in Houston. Susan Hilliard was a founder of the Garden Club of Houston, established in 1924 and still active in the Houston community. In 1967 the house passed to the current owners, the Hilliard's son and daughter-in-law; it is one of very few homes in River Oaks that remain in the hands of the original family. Because the façade of the Hilliard House has undergone very little change since its construction 74 years ago, it is a visual reminder of the initial development of River Oaks.

The Hilliard House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 for Landmark and Protected Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Hilliard House at 3375 Del Monte Drive was built by contractor J. Leon Osborn as a speculative house. Construction began in November 1935. At that time the following article appeared in the Houston Post:

Osborn Building \$37,500 Dwelling: Permit was issued last week for the construction of a 2-story brick veneer residence to contain 11 rooms at 3375 Del Monte Drive in River Oaks for J. Leon Osborn, contractor, at a cost of approximately \$30,000. The site was purchased by Mr. Osborn for \$7,500 of which \$2,500 was in cash. Total investment in the home under construction will be around \$37,500.

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Correspondence in the River Oaks Scrapbooks reveals that the house was completed circa June 1936. The scrapbook contains letters from each of the River Oaks Corporation salespersons touting the benefits of the new home.

A letter from Harry Mott (husband of well-known builder Katharine Mott) stated, “We believe you will enjoy seeing the new \$35,000 home at 3375 Del Monte Drive. One of the attractive features is a bathroom for each bedroom...On June 11 and 12, we are inviting a limited number to see it before it is opened to the general public and hope it will be possible for you to come out...”

Salesperson Joe A Graham wrote, “The bathroom and kitchen are finished with Carrara glass-beautiful to look at, easy to clean. The floors of these rooms are rubber tile-easy on the feet and lasting a lifetime. Downstairs, in addition to the usual rooms, is a sun porch and library, a real man’s room with gun case, fireplace and beamed ceiling.”

In his letter, D.W. Moreland said, “There is a heavy slate roof which adds beauty to the building and saves money on your insurance bill.”

The house was sold by the next month. On July 18, 1936, articles appeared in both the Chronicle and the Houston Post announcing the sale:

46,500 Paid for Two River Oaks Homes: Two Houston insurance men Saturday closed deals for River Oaks homes involving \$46,500 cash. The principals were Norman D. Adams...and Harry Hilliard, who bought an English house at 3375 Del Monte for \$32,500 cash. Both houses are new. Both men are with the firm of Adams & Porter. The Del Monte house was purchased from Leon Osborn, builder.

Insurance Men Buy in River Oaks: Two officials at the marine insurance firm Adams and Porter last week paid a total of \$46,500 cash for homes in River Oaks, but neither knew the other was making a purchase of a house....Harry Hilliard bought the large two story English type dwelling at 3375 Del Monte Drive for \$32,500 cash. Mr. Hilliard recently sold his home in Southmore to Harry Payne of the Houston Press.

Harry and Susan Hilliard

Harry Hilliard was born circa 1881 in London, England. He lived in Houston for approximately 50 years, so he therefore arrived in the City when he was 26. At the time of his purchase of the home, in 1936, he was a member of the marine insurance firm, Adams & Porter. Founded in 1907, Adams & Porter was a Houston-based international insurance brokerage company specializing in energy and maritime insurance. Adams & Porter covered such events as refinery explosions, hurricanes, fires, ship groundings and collisions.

According to DeGraaf Adams, grandson of Norman Adams, Adams & Porter, was founded by Norman D. Adams’ father, Henry Adams, in the early 1900s. In 1936, Mr. Hilliard’s offices with Adams & Porter Associates were located at the Cotton Exchange Building. Mr. Hilliard remained one of the main principals of Adams & Porter until his death in 1958. Mr. Adams served as a pallbearer in his funeral. In 1987, Adams & Porter was acquired by AON, a large insurance conglomerate.

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Mr. Hilliard was a prominent Houstonian and, upon his death in 1958, the Houston Chronicle wrote a story “Rites Held for Insurance Man Hilliard.” He was one of the first members of the Houston Country Club, a commodore for the Houston Yacht Club and a charter member of St. John the Divine Church. He was also a member of the Houston Cotton Exchange. Pallbearers for his funeral included Birdsall Briscoe and Norman Adams, as mentioned above. Mrs. Susan Townsend Hilliard was also a native of England. She was a consummate gardener and early member of The Garden Club of Houston.

Susan Hilliard was one of the seven founders of the Garden Club of Houston (GCH). Other founding members included: Mrs. Herbert Roberts, Mrs. Card Elliott, Mrs. Arthur Boice, Mrs. Robert Morris, Mrs. Charles Robertson, and Mrs. Curtis Walker. GCH was established in 1924 and is still active in the Houston community. One year after its founding, GCH accepted forty additional members. In 1931 GCH designed and planted the gardens of the Museum of Fine Arts, which the club continues to maintain. They support this endeavor with the annual Fall Bulb Mart, which has become one of the largest horticultural events in Texas.

J. Leon Osborn

The Hilliard House at 3375 Del Monte Drive was built by J. (John) Leon Osborn, who actively built houses in River Oaks from the 1930s to the 1950s. He was a native Houstonian and died there in 1972. He was involved in the community as a member of First Methodist Church; Board of Directors of Asbury Seminary of Wilmore, Kentucky; Board of Directors of Star of Hope; and a lifetime member of Gideon’s.

The list of Osborn homes in River Oaks includes the following:

- 3308 Chevy Chase (1938) - now 1820 River Oaks Blvd, former home of Mrs. J. C. Bering and General Maurice and Winifred Hirsch.
- 3615 Meadow Lake Lane (1939)
- 3457 Meadow Lake Lane (1940)
- 3909 Del Monte (1948) - J. Leon Osborn’s residence.
- 3664 Inverness (1949) – City of Houston Historic Landmark
- 3699 Willowick (1950) – now 3711 Willowick, former home of Jacques and Candace Mossler and current home of Francisco and Sharon Lorenzo.
- 3755 Knollwood (1950)
- 1929 Olympia-demolished

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.

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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 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.”

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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.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Harry Hilliard home is Tudor revival influenced, a style that became fashionable in the 1920s and early 1930s. The style is one loosely based on a variety of late Medieval English prototypes, ranging from thatch-roofed folk cottages to grand manor houses. These homes are usually characterized by steeply-pitched front-facing gables.

Historically unique to its neighborhood, it has been in the hands of the Hilliard family for its entire seventy-four years. After Susan Townsend Hilliard's death, the house passed to her son and daughter-in-law, Henry T. and Lydia Caffery Hilliard who moved in with their four children in 1967. As such, the home's façade has undergone almost no change since its building in 1935-36.

The two-story home rests centrally on a large wooded lot on Del Monte, its irregularly shaped footprint belying the asymmetrical house organization. The main living areas set off to the west of the northern facing front entrance, with a less deep living space to the east. The large bay on the west of the front façade has an extension to a third level due to the pitched gable, a single rectangular window allowing light into its interior.

The balloon framed home is veneered with a lovely, irregular mixture of deep red brick and has an asymmetrical front façade. The home has a steep wood shingled roof, a prominent chimney on the eastern edge of the north front of the facade. The form of the internal chimney is expressed in the front façade through the protrusion of a large rectangular volume on the first

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level, leading to a narrower volume on the second level, and a narrow rectangular spout extruding from the top. A series of joists are expressed on the exterior of the roof eave.

On the north side, the home faces Del Monte Drive with five rectangular windows on both the first and second floor. The windows on the first floor are of special interest with their irregular patterned and variously hued leaded glass. On the entire façade, the windows are unevenly trimmed by roughhewn stone blocks creating a stately effect.

The home boasts a particularly elegant entryway. The front porch is guarded by two finely trimmed trees. A couple brick steps lead up to the gallant entrance, a rough hewn stone arch covered by a proportionately sized steeply pitched gable dormer provides a small shelter set before the single-door front entrance. A serrated wood trim lines the inner edges of the pitched gable dormer.

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.

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- (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 Hilliard House at 3375 Del Monte Drive.

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EXHIBIT A
HILLIARD HOUSE
3375 DEL MONTE DRIVE



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EXHIBIT B
SITE LOCATION MAP
HILLIARD HOUSE
3375 DEL MONTE DRIVE
NOT TO SCALE

