

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** John C. McEwen House  
**OWNER:** Dolores Tarlton  
**APPLICANT:** Courtney Tardy – GHPA  
**LOCATION:** 3819 Olympia Drive – River Oaks

**AGENDA ITEM:** II.B  
**HPO FILE NO:** 11L242  
**DATE ACCEPTED:** Feb-18-2011  
**HAHC HEARING DATE:** Jun-16-2011

### SITE INFORMATION

Lot 10, Block 81, River Oaks Section 11, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site includes an historic two-story wood-frame residence with brick veneer.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The residence located at 3819 Olympia was built by the Russell Brown Company, a noted Houston building firm, as a speculative home in 1942. The Russell Brown Company was a leader in Texas home design and construction and built prestigious homes for many of the elite citizens of Houston as well as Texas. The Russell Brown Company was founded in Houston in 1906 and built a number of stylish and important houses in Houston, San Antonio, Dallas and other Texas cities. The home has only been owned by three families: the McEwens, the Wells and the Tarltons. Dudley Tarlton was a Houston aviator who owned a helicopter transport company called Tarlton Helicopters.

The John C. McEwen House meets Criteria 1, 4, and 6 for Landmark designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The home located at 3819 Olympia was built as a speculative home and completed in 1942. The first advertisement for the home appeared on March 1, 1942 in the Houston Post promoting an open house. The ad, placed by the River Oaks Corporation, listed the asking price as \$13,000; and listed four other Olympia addresses (#3800, #3761, and #3838) for sale.

In two months, the home was sold to John C. and Mildred McEwen. Their purchase was publicized on May 24, 1942 by both the *Houston Post* and the *Houston Chronicle* with a photograph of the home. The *Houston Post* carried the following text:

*“John C. McEwen Buys Home – Mr. and Mrs. John C. McEwen purchased this home at 3819 Olympia Drive in River Oaks during the week for \$13,000. The seller was Russell Brown Company. The house includes three bedrooms, a den, screened porch, two baths and a powder room...The site is 65 by 130 feet. Mr. McEwen handles plumbing, heating and electrical supplies.”*

According to the photograph featured in the article, the house looks today as it did when it was built.

Information on John C. and Mildred McEwen comes from City Directories and census data as there are no death dates or obituaries that could be found. In checking Census data, it appears that there was a couple named Mildred and John McEwen who lived in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1930. It is unclear if this

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is the same family; however, the uniqueness of the name makes it possible. Through the City Directories, it appears that the McEwens moved to Houston in the late 1930s. By 1941, they were living in Houston at 1848 Marshall and in 1942 they moved into the house at 3819 Olympia. By 1951, the McEwens are still in the Olympia home and are running a business called McEwen & Co. Plumbing Supplies. It appears that the McEwens moved from Houston in the late 1950s. Their son, John McEwen III, appears to have taken over the business with a partner named Osborn Bennett.

John C. and Mildred McEwen lived in the home for 13 years, until the mid 1950s, when it was purchased by George E. Wells. Wells was a department manager for Cravens and Dargen. Cravens, Dargen & Co. listed themselves as “Managing General Agents Insurance” with offices located at 1903 Herman. The Wells family then sold the home to the Dudley and Dolores Tarlton in the 1960s.

Benjamin Dudley Tarlton, III (1930-2003) was born in Corpus Christi to Benjamin Dudley Tarlton, Jr., a long-time South Texas attorney, and Catherine Bluntzer Tarlton. The University of Texas law school is named for his grandfather, Benjamin Dudley Tarlton. Tarlton earned degrees from St. Mary’s University in San Antonio and the University of Texas School of Law. He served in the United States Air Force from 1949 to 1953. He was an attorney, but his real passion was flying. Tarlton was remembered by his sibling at his death with the following: "He lived to fly. He once told me that he walked out of his office, one of those skyscrapers in downtown Houston, looked up at the sky and said, 'Why am I not up there?' So this is really the way he wanted to live his life."

Tarlton made his passion into his occupation when he became the owner and operator of Tarlton Helicopters, a Gulf Coast aviation transport company with its principal office in Houston. His career in aviation spanned six decades. He was also known for his love of swimming, and he achieved a national ranking in Masters swimming competitions. Tarlton died doing what he loved best, flying, in 2003 over the Gulf of Mexico.

### *Russell Brown Company*

One of the Houston’s most prolific builders was the Russell Brown Company, which offered custom homes marketed to Houston’s middle and upper class from the 1910s until World War II. Brown’s houses were known to be of the first quality in design and materials. The Russell Brown Company was responsible for many homes designed and built in Avondale, Courtlandt Place, Boulevard Oaks, Broadacres, Montrose, River Oaks, and Westmoreland, where Brown himself resided. Among the architects who worked at various times for the Russell Brown Company in Houston were A. N. Dawson, Charles W. Oliver, Mike Mebane, and Gonzalo Ancira. In an indication of the quality of the Russell Brown architects, the River Oaks Corporation hired one of Russell Brown’s architects, Charles Oliver, as in-house architect in 1926.

Russell Brown was born on December 12, 1875, in Taylor, Texas, and came to Houston in 1902. He organized the Russell Brown Company in 1908 and remained extremely active in residential construction until after World War II. In 1919, the Russell Brown Company published a catalog of some of its completed projects entitled Modern Homes. Brown expanded his operations by opening branch offices in Dallas in 1916, San Antonio in 1922, and Los Angeles in 1923.

The Russell Brown Company provided architectural services (although Brown himself was not an architect) in addition to construction services. The firm specialized in house design and construction,

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and also designed several commercial buildings in Houston in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the first Jefferson Davis Hospital and the Schlumberger Building (1936), as well as the six-story Guaranty State Bank and Simpson Office Building in Ardmore, Oklahoma in 1917.

Additional information on the Russell Brown Company comes from a company brochure published circa 1936 which notes the following: “The restful harmony and careful designing, the elegance imparted by graceful simplicity marks the difference between Russell Brown Company homes and the regular run of places so often built.”

There are many Russell Brown Company houses in Houston, and this list provides a sampling with an emphasis on River Oaks:

- 1805 Kirby Drive, Residence of Mr. and Mrs. Roy G. Cullen
- Home of Mr. and Mrs. Jack R. Tenison (corner of Kirby and Brentwood)
- 3258 Avalon Drive
- 2131 Pelham Drive (demolished)
- 3235 Reba Drive (demolished)
- 3238 Ella Lee Lane (demolished)
- 1216 South Shepherd Drive
- Home of Captain A.S. Hansen, Port Arthur, Texas
- Home for Dr. and Mrs. John Foster at 1708 River Oaks Boulevard (demolished), 1980 Architectural Survey
- Home for Mr. and Mrs. A.J. Smith at 3217 Inwood Drive, 1980 Architectural Survey
- 2144 Brentwood Drive, 1929
- 2224 Brentwood Drive, 1929
- 2510 Inwood Drive, 1929
- 2125 Pine Valley Drive, 1930
- 2240 Looscan Lane, 1931 (demolished)
- 2940 Del Monte Drive, 1930
- 1517 Kirby Drive, 1931
- 3016 Chevy Chase, 1931
- 2514 Brentwood, 1931
- 2235 Brentwood, 1937
- 2247 Del Monte, 1937
- 2235 Brentwood, 1937
- 2419 Del Monte, 1937
- 2153 Pelham, 1938
- 3235 Reba, 1938 (demolished)

Russell Brown retired from the building business around the time of World War II. He lived in retirement at this ranch near Juliff, Texas, south of Houston, where he died in 1963.

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## *River Oaks*

When Will C. Hogg, Mike Hogg, and Hugh Potter began the development of River Oaks in 1923, they intended to create a community demonstrating the highest standards of modern community planning, a role model for the rest of Houston to follow. Will Hogg's ambition 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. Since its creation, River Oaks has been published in national news, real estate, and design media, and has 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, such as Westmoreland (1902), Avondale (1907), Montrose (1911), Audubon Place (1906), Cherryhurst (1908), Binz, Southmore (1914), and Courtland Place (1906). 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.

## **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY**

The 1942 Russell Brown Company home located at 3819 Olympia may be described as a traditional Colonial Revival style home of the pre-World War II era. The Colonial Revival style was a style popular in the United States between 1890 and 1935. The Colonial Revival style resulted from a rejection of the Queen Anne Revival style, and a desire to return to a more "traditional" American building type. The style took on added popularity with the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1920s. This style draws from the simple building forms typical of early American colonial structures, and elements of classical or Georgian architecture. It is closely related to the Neoclassical Revival and Georgian Revival styles. Colonial Revival residential structures are typically one or two stories, with hipped or gabled roofs and symmetrical facades. The entryway or porch is the primary focus, often highlighted with a decorative crown or pediment. Other areas of elaboration are the cornice and windows.

This is precisely the type of upper middle-class home that the Russell Brown Company did so well. The house faces north on a 65'x130' lot. It has a typical design of a central, three-part house, with a supplementary one-story sunroom added to the east side of the house. The exterior appears to be in original condition with minimal changes.

The house is constructed of wood frame and brick veneer that has been painted. The roof has a side gabled roof covered with asphalt shingles. The central bay of the house contains the front entrance on the first floor and a 3-over-3 wood sash window above. The entrance features an entry portico with two pairs of Doric columns with an iron-work railing above it. The entrance door is a traditional wood paneled door with two lights.

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To either side of the central bay are wood sash windows with 15-over-15 lights. A string course of brick decoratively divides the first and second floors of the house. Above the windows on the first floor are 3-over-3 wood sash windows on the second floor. Shutters flank each window. A plain wooden entablature painted white extends underneath the length of the roof ridge.

The side porch contains jalousie windows that, if not original, are common to the general period and are probably over 50 years old.

The landscaping of the lot is traditional in nature with several large pine and oaks trees providing shade to the home. In particular, an enormous oak dominates the back yard of the lot.

*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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## APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

### Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation

(a) The HAHC, 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**

- (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;
  
- (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)).

### STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the John C. McEwen House at 3819 Olympia Drive.

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**EXHIBIT A**  
**JOHN C. MCEWEN HOUSE**  
**3819 OLYMPIA DRIVE**





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## EXHIBIT B SITE LOCATION MAP JOHN C. McEWEN HOUSE 3819 OLYMPIA DRIVE NOT TO SCALE

