

## PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Rufus Cage Elementary School

**OWNER:** City of Houston

**APPLICANT:** Same

**LOCATION:** 1417 Telephone Road – East End

**AGENDA ITEM:** II

**HPO FILE NO:** 11PL108

**DATE ACCEPTED:** Oct-26-2011

**HAHC HEARING:** Nov-22-2011

**SITE INFORMATION:** Tract 4, Block 21, Eastlawn Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story brick school building set on a raised foundation.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

Rufus Cage Elementary School at 1417 Telephone Road is one of the oldest school buildings still standing in Houston. Built in 1910, the raised two-story mission-style brick school with four classrooms served students in Houston's East End until 1983. The school was named for Rufus Cage, a longtime school board trustee and president, who donated the land upon which the school was built. Originally a county school, Cage Elementary became part of the City of Houston's public school system in 1914. After the school moved to a new campus in 1983, Houston Independent School District (HISD) used the old building primarily for storage. In October 2011, HISD transferred the vacant school property to the City of Houston, which is seeking this protected landmark designation.

Despite some deterioration in recent years, the school building is structurally sound, and retains much of its original 1910 features, including high ceilings in the two classroom floors, tall wood windows, beadboard on the walls, and wood floors. The exterior brick is now covered with stucco, and the open ground level was enclosed years ago for school offices and library and features ceilings barely 6 feet high.

Rufus Cage Elementary School meets Criteria 1, 4, 5 and 8 for Landmark and Protected Landmark designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Rufus Cage School is one of the oldest public school buildings still standing in Houston. Built in 1910 as a county school, the two-story mission-style brick schoolhouse served generations of East End families until 1983, when a new building was built for Cage Elementary on nearby Leeland Street. Since that time, the original Cage School has served as a storage facility for HISD. Although the building has suffered some deterioration in recent years, it is structurally sound and retains much of its original 1910 appearance.

The Cage School first opened in 1907 on the south side of Telephone Road (aka Sims Bayou Road) as the Kirby School, named after William A. Kirby, who was a trustee for the county schools. The farm and homestead of W. A. Kirby and his family was located on the south side of Telephone Road close to the school, and Kirby and his sons worked variously as shopkeepers, contractors and mechanics in the area. The subdivision platted in 1906 to the south of Telephone Road was named

# CITY OF HOUSTON

for W.A. Kirby, and several of the streets - Monroe, Wesley, and Mable streets - bear the names of Kirby children. The original Kirby house on Telephone Road was later relocated to the 1600 block of Mable St, where it still stands. Mrs. W.A. Kirby (Fannie) was the first president of the school's PTA, or 'Mothers' Club.' Two decades later, the Kirbys' daughter, Mable (Mrs. Henry C. Lane), who was a student at the school the first year it opened, served as PTA president at Cage School in 1925-1927.

The one-room school's first teacher was Maggie Dullahan. Two years later, a second room was added to the small wood-frame school building. According to the '50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Pictorial History' for Cage School put together by Mrs. H. E Eades in 1957, this original building was later cut in half and became two five-room cottages at the corner of Wesley and Dumble. The school grew quickly and in 1910, a new two-story brick building with four classrooms was built to accommodate this growth on the north side of Telephone Road.

Rufus Cage, a member of the Houston School Board for sixteen years and president of the board for eight, donated the land upon which the brick school was built, and the new school was named in his honor. The cornerstone for 'Cage School' names L.L. Pugh as County Superintendent; school trustees, W. A. Kirby, N.O. Jones, and R.C. Mayes; architects, Jones & Tabor; contractors, Meyer & Vaughan. At the dedication ceremony in 1910, Rufus Cage spoke from the front steps. Born October 23, 1853, Cage was a prominent Houstonian who worked in the insurance business along with other endeavors. Rufus Cage died on May 19, 1918, and was buried at Glenwood Cemetery.

Charles P. Jones and J. Rodney Tabor (1886-1955) were the architects of Cage School. Tabor, a graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, partnered with Henry F. Jonas starting in 1923. Some of Tabor's later works include Lanier Middle School and the Third Church of Christ, Scientist on Almeda Road.

In 1914, Cage School left the suburban county school system and became part of the city school district. According to some accounts, sometime between 1914 and 1925, the school closed its doors and the building served as housing to families within the agricultural community. However, city directories from the time continue to list Cage School, so it is unclear when or if this occurred.

In 1910, the Mothers' Club purchased a few things for the school, such as play-ground equipment, maps, globes, and a piano, by raising money from chili suppers, cake sales and dances. The members also sponsored picnics and Christmas trees with gifts for all the children. This started a long tradition of parental support for Cage School. Parents were very involved throughout the years Cage was open, raising money to add a cafeteria/auditorium in the 1940s, to buy supplies and equipment for the school, and to advocate to keep the school open through the 1970s despite its small size.

In 1983, a new school campus was built for Cage Elementary on Leeland Street and the school moved out of the Telephone Road building. Since this time, the old Cage school building has been used by HISD for storage. The Cage School was included on Greater Houston Preservation Alliance's Endangered Buildings List in early 2004. HISD placed the property up for auction, but the community persuaded the school district to work with them to find a new use for this historic building with the goal of preserving the property. On October 13, 2011, the HISD Board of Trustees voted to transfer the property to the City of Houston, which was accepted by City Council on October 26, 2011.

## ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Rufus Cage School is a raised two-story masonry building in the mission style. The open ground level was later enclosed and, despite ceilings as low as 6-ft, served as the school library and administrative offices while the school was still operating. The upper two floors feature two large classrooms on each level, with high ceilings, tall windows, beadboard on walls, and wood floors.

In 2008, Hurricane Ike damaged the building's roof, which is currently covered by a tarp. Despite some water damage, recent inspections have determined the building to be structurally sound.

An engineering assessment done for the City in 2011 contains the following description of the building:

“Old photographs reveal that originally brick walls were exposed. At the time of construction the lower level was open, much like a raised cottage. It appears the school was basically a four room school house with two large class rooms per floor. The first floor was reached by the large stairs that reached to the entry porch. Students entered a central hall which fed the two first floor classrooms....

The ground level was not originally enclosed.... The Auditorium/Library space were added at a later date. ... it appears the auditorium may date from the late thirties or early forties.

The 1920 school appears to be in fairly good shape although evidence of structural repairs is found in the tension rods and plates evident at the floor lines and at roof level. These steel rods are also observed in the building. It is possible these repairs were when the building was stuccoed.

The 1910 building is an icon in the neighborhood and should be renovated for community use as proposed.”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

‘50th Anniversary Pictorial History,’ Mrs. H. E. Eades, 1957.

Assessment of Rufus Cage Elementary, Bill Neuhaus.

Harris County Plat Maps

Houston Architectural Survey, 1980.

Houston City Directories.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1924–Feb 1951. Vol 9, 1925-July 1950, Sheet 935.

U.S. Census.

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

# CITY OF HOUSTON

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## APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

**S**   **NA**

**S - satisfies**   **NA - not applicable**

Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-229(a)(1):

- (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).

**OR**

- The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2);

# CITY OF HOUSTON

**Archaeological & Historical Commission**

**Planning and Development Department**

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**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 Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of Rufus Cage Elementary School at 1417 Telephone Road.

**EXHIBIT A**  
RUFUS CAGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL  
1417 TELEPHONE ROAD



1910



2011

# CITY OF HOUSTON

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**EXHIBIT B**  
**SITE LOCATION MAP**  
**RUFUS CAGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**  
**1417 TELEPHONE ROAD.**  
**NOT TO SCALE**

