

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: The Jack R. and Auban Tenison House

OWNER: James and Nancy Butler

APPLICANT: Same as Owner

LOCATION: 1609 Kirby Drive - River Oaks

AGENDA ITEM: V

HPO FILE NO: 14PL118

DATE ACCEPTED: Dec-31-2014

HAHC HEARING: Jan-16-2014

SITE INFORMATION: Track 2, Block 37 River Oaks Section 1, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic two-story, brick single family residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Jack R. and Auban Tenison House was designed and built by the Russell Brown Company in 1935. 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. Mike Mebane, the staff architect at the company, was the architect for 1609 Kirby Drive. The Tenison House is designed in the Tudor style. Jack Tenison was in the automobile and financing business. He also owned and sold several homes and lots in River Oaks. The house is significant for its architecture, the Russell Brown Company, and its occupants.

The Jack R. and Auban Tenison House at 1609 Kirby Drive meets Criteria 1, 4, and 6 for Protected Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Jack R. Tenison

John Robert Tenison was born on October 23, 1893, and raised in Dallas, Texas. His family on his father's side was early Dallas residents. The Tenison family owned the Tenison Borthers Saddlery Company and had banking interests in Dallas. Jack attended the University of Texas. By 1917, he was working as a merchant in Waxahachie, Texas.

John and his brother William Tenison moved to Houston before 1919 and started the Tenison Motor Company. The Tenison Motor Company was quite successful. Jack ran the dealership and wholesale side; his brother William handled the auto financing. The brothers soon diversified into home development.

In the 1920s, the brothers began to buy small parcels of real estate; they developed and sold them. They did this in subdivisions around Houston, including River Oaks, Cottage Grove, Valencia Park, Central Park, and the Anderson Addition. In 1928, Jack Tenison took out a lien of \$18,000 for the Russell Brown Company to develop the lot at 2131 Brentwood. That home was sold in 1930 to E.A. Pearson. In 1932, Tenison sold a Russell Brown home at 2949 Chevy Chase to Burton McCollom. The Tenison family did not live in either home.

In 1932, Jack Tenison moved to River Oaks to 2158 Pelham Drive; this home may have been designed by William Farrington (listing for 2160 Pelham in TGCA Monthly Bulletin, February 1932). Jack Tenison's brother William and wife Lucille moved to 2136 Stanmore the same year.

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Later, the William Tenison family lived at 2156 Troon, in a home designed by Mike Mebane and Addison McElroy.

Auban Tenison

Auban Mae Blake Tenison was born in Honey Grove, Texas, on December 22, 1897. She married Jack Tension in 1917. They divorced in the 1940s. She died on February 3, 1986 in Sonoma, California.

The Jack Tenison home at 1609 Kirby Drive was built in 1935. The September T.G.C.A. Monthly Bulletin for that year shows a listing for the two-story, nine-room brick veneer residence to be built at a cost of \$19,000 by the Russell Brown Company.

The Tenisons lived in the home on Kirby only for a short time; by 1942 they had moved to 3655 Overbrook, into yet another Russell Brown Company designed home. Jack died on January 5, 1969.

Russell Brown Company

According to Stephen Fox, the Russell Brown Company was a Houston-based architectural design and construction company. It was chartered in 1906 by Russell Brown. Brown was born on December 12, 1875 in Taylor, Texas and came to Houston in 1902. The company was a prolific builder and designer of new houses in Houston from 1902 until the early 1940s. Brown expanded his operations by opening branch offices in Dallas by 1916, San Antonio by 1922 and Los Angeles, California in 1923. The firm specialized in house design and construction. It designed several commercial buildings in Houston in the 1920s as well as the 6-story Guaranty State Bank and Simpson Office Building in Ardmore, Oklahoma (1917), and the Schlumberger Building in Houston (1936).

The Russell Brown Company constructed numerous houses in the Westmoreland, Montrose, Boulevard Oaks, and River Oaks neighborhoods in Houston and the Dallas subdivision of Munger Place. The company was the general contractor of such notable Houston houses as the William S. Farish house in Shadyside (1925) and the Cleveland Sewall House in River Oaks (1926, National Historic Landmark). The major houses it designed and built were the Herbert L. Kokernot House in Monte Vista in San Antonio (1928), the O.L. Seagraves House at the Mo-Ranch near Hunt (1929), the Talbott F. Rothwell House in Beaumont (1929), and the W.B. Morgan House in Olmos Park Estates in Olmos Park (1931). 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. As an indication of the quality of the Russell Brown architects, River Oaks Corporation hired one of their architects, Charles Oliver, away as in-house architect in 1926.

Additional information on the Russell Brown Company comes from a company brochure published around 1936. It boasts of:

“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.”

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Through this brochure, the 1980 Architectural Survey and River Oaks Scrapbooks, we have gathered the following list of other Russell Brown Company homes. There are many Russell Brown Company homes, and this list provides a sampling with an emphasis on River Oaks:

- 2232 Brentwood
- 2128 Brentwood
- 2123 Bellmeade
- 2223 Inwood
- 3325 Inwood
- 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 a ranch near Juliff, Texas, south of Houston, where he died in 1963.

Mike Mebane

Mike Mebane was the staff architect for the Russell Brown Company in the mid-1930s. The following information is from a biographical sketch of Mike Mebane, written by the University of Texas in a description of the Mike and Maxine K. Mebane Endowed Traveling Scholarship in Architecture:

Mike Mebane (1908-1997), born and educated in Texas, pursued his architectural career through the early 1970s in Texas, the United States, and in Mexico. Mebane was born Jan. 24, 1908, in Trinity, Texas, to Charles Richmond and Ella Beuhring Mebane. He went to the University of Texas at the age of 16 and graduated in 1928 with a bachelor's degree in architectural engineering. He served his apprenticeship in architects' and engineers' offices in Houston, Fort Worth and Dallas, forming his own firm in Houston in 1935. His brother, Robert Duff Mebane of San Antonio, who was then earning his degree in geology at UT, introduced Mike to Maxine Kubela, who received her bachelor's degree in physical education that year.

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Married in 1937, the Mebanes remained in Houston until World War II took them to Washington, D.C., where Mike served four years in the U.S. Navy, attaining the rank of lieutenant commander in the Civil Engineering Corps. After the war, they relocated to Beaumont, where Pitts, Mebane and Phelps was created. Their work included laboratories for industry, the Texaco Research Center, St. Elizabeth Hospital and twin dormitory towers for the University of Houston, among buildings for six universities.

The firm was associated with Brooks Barr Graeber & White and Page Southerland Page of Austin as architects for the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, and with the Max Brooks Group for the Labor Department Building in Washington, D.C. They received many awards and honors, including the American Institute of Architects' First Honor Award for Industrial Architecture.

The Mebanes retired to San Angelo in 1973 when Maxine inherited a home on the Concho River. Mike enjoyed gardening and was involved in the Texas Archaeological Society and Texas Society of Architects. He was also a member of the Littlefield Society, the Chancellor's Council at the University and an early donor to the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts.

Among the homes listed as the design of Mike Mebane in River Oaks are:

- 2156 Troon Road, Home for Mr. and Mrs. W.H. Tenison, designed with Addison McElroy
- 1832 Kirby Dr.
- 2124 Inwood Dr. (demolished)
- 2135 Looscan Lane
- 2213 Del Monte Dr.
- 2240 Inwood Dr. (demolished)
- 2432 Inwood Dr.
- 3258 Avalon Place
- 3385 Del Monte Dr.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Tenison House at 1609 Kirby faces northwest on to the corner of Brentwood and Kirby drives. The 5,784 square foot house is sited towards the rear of an irregularly shaped 24,914 square foot lot. The house is faced in brick and features a hipped roof with gabled bays. The house is designed in the Tudor style. The residence was renovated in 2001-2002; all of the windows were replaced during the renovation. All of the existing windows are wood divided lite fixed, sash, and casement windows.

The main part of the house contains the central entrance located in a central bay with a front gable roof. The entrance is recessed and features a stone surround; the entrance features the original wood entry door. The central bay front gable features stepped stone detailing.

The first floor of the front façade moving east to west features a 6 lite arched casement window, and a four lite fixed window. There is a 6 lite arched casement window to the west of the main entrance, a brick exterior chimney with decorative brick detailing, a 6 lite arched casement window to the west of the chimney, and a 16 lite casement window on the west corner. The second floor features two 4-over-4 sash windows on the east corner. The central bay features two 4 lite fixed windows, a 4-over-4 arched window and 6 lite fixed window. To the east of the

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chimney is a 4-over-4 sash window and to the west are two 4-over-4 sash windows and a ribbon of three 4-over-4 sash windows.

The west elevation facing Kirby Drive is partially obscured due to landscaping and tall brick wall. The first floor of the façade features two 6 lite casement windows, two arched 16 lite fixed windows flank a small covered porch with a hipped roof and four round columns. The porch features a set of 4 lite french doors. The second floor features four 6 lite casement windows. The west elevation of front façade bay features a 4 lite fixed window.

The east elevation features a one-story porte cochere with two arched openings. The porte cochere features a side gable roof. The first floor of the elevation features an entry door and tow divided lite window under the porte cochere; another divided lite windows is located to the south of the porte cochere. The second floor features a 4-over- sash window and a sash window in the side gable of the porte cochere.

1609 Kirby Drive was recently purchased by new owners, who plan a renovation of the property. The renovation will include the replacement of the non-original windows with new aluminum clad wood windows that are based in the original divided lite metal windows. The renovation will also include the construction of a one-story covered porch on the west elevation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Houston City Directories, various publishers
- Texas General Contractors' Association Bulletin
- Various resources from Ancestry.com
- River Oaks Scrapbooks, River Oaks Collection, Houston Public Library.

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

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
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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;

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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)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Jack R. and Auban Tenison House at 1609 Kirby Drive.

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EXHIBIT A
JAKE R. AND AUBAN TENISON HOUSE
1609 KIRBY DRIVE



PRE 2001-2002 RENOVATION



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EXHIBIT B
SITE LOCATION MAP
JACK R. AND AUBAN TENISON HOUSE
1609 KIRBY DRIVE

