

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Louis White Grocery

OWNERS: Ashley Ruiz

APPLICANTS: Ashley Ruiz

LOCATION: 4101 Lyons Avenue, Houston, Texas, 77020 – Fifth Ward

AGENDA ITEM: C

HPO FILE NO.:

DATE ACCEPTED: 10/14/2020

HAHC HEARING: 11/18/2020

SITE INFORMATION: Lot 1, Block B, Burke Section 4, Fifth Ward, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story 3,736 square foot commercial and mixed residential building on a 5,000 square foot lot.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

Louis White Grocery (c. 1955) is a two-story, vernacular commercial and mixed residential building located in the Fifth Ward, which is north of Buffalo Bayou and east of downtown Houston.

In 1866, the city added a Fifth Ward, which incorporated areas north of Buffalo Bayou and east of White Oak Bayou that had been part of the First and Second Wards. This area was populated by primarily Anglo-Americans and Northern European immigrants. Farther east of this neighborhood and outside of the city limits freed people settled in a sparsely populated area that developed into a predominantly African American community. This is the section that is known as the Fifth Ward today. This isolated community began to develop quickly when railroads were built in the area.

According to the *Houston Chronicle*, Elnora and Louis White owned and operated a successful grocery store that became a “haven for those who needed credit, counsel and medical help.” The Louis White Grocery was considered the cornerstone of the neighborhood, and customers understood that if times were tough the White family was there to help them. After her husband’s death in 1967, Elnora White and her son Carl ran the store. Carl was a well-known building contractor and a Korean War Veteran. After Carl passed away on September 15, 1984 at the age of 51, the store was leased to others and operated until the early 2000s.

The current building is typical of simple vernacular commercial buildings built between the 1950s and 1960s. The Harris County Appraisal District dates the building to 1955. The ghost of a Googie style full-width, cantilevered zigzag canopy is visible in the early photos (see Exhibit D).

The current owner Ashley Ruiz purchased 4101 Lyons in 2015. She is seeking a landmark designation for Louis White Grocery in order to honor Mrs. Elnora White for her significant service to the neighborhood. Additionally, the building is important to the community and is representative of the neighborhood’s history and character. Louis White Grocery meets criteria 1, 3, and 8 for landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE*FIFTH WARD*

Louis White Grocery is located in the Fifth Ward, which is north of Buffalo Bayou and east of downtown Houston. The Fifth Ward is a mixed residential, commercial and industrial neighborhood.

In 1866, the population density increased enough that the City of Houston created a Fifth Ward, which incorporated areas north of Buffalo Bayou and east of White Oak Bayou that had been part of the First and Second Wards. The neighborhood was mostly settled by Anglo-Americans and Northern European immigrants who worked and lived in the area. This section of the Fifth Ward is usually called the Near Northside today.

After the Civil War, freed people settled in the sparsely populated area east of this neighborhood and outside of the city limits. This is the neighborhood that is known as the Fifth Ward today. This isolated community developed quickly when railroads began to be built in the area. The city limits were expanded in 1866, 1874, 1903 and 1917, gradually moving east and encompassing the African American settlement.

According to *"Houston's Forgotten Heritage: Landscape, Houses, Interiors, 1824-1914,"* freed people that were formerly enslaved in East Texas began building small homes on the north side of Buffalo bayou in settlements known as "the Bottoms," while formerly enslaved people from plantations in Brazoria and Fort Bend counties settled south of the bayou. Mexican immigrants arrived in the area in the 1880s, but a significant community was not established until the Mexican Revolution in 1910.

Early development of the Fifth Ward was tied to railroads. In 1881, the Southern Pacific Railroad's yard and maintenance shops were built and created many jobs. The second half of the nineteenth century brought an increase in business and social networks. A strong black community was established and flourishing in the eastern Fifth Ward. Many residents worked at the Southern Pacific railyard or the Houston Ship Channel. Others, particularly black women, commuted across town to work as domestics. In addition, there were several successful black-owned businesses in the neighborhood, including a pharmacy, dentist's office, an undertaking parlor, a theater and several barber shops on Lyons Avenue.

By 1927, Phillis Wheatley High School had 2,600 students and sixty teachers, making it one of the largest black high schools in America. The number of businesses was growing as well. In the 1930s, printing plants, photography studios, the Club Matinee nightspot (known as the Cotton Club of the South) flourished in the vibrant neighborhood. After World War II, the Fifth Ward community was the economic center of black Houston with Lyons Avenue as the commercial district. However, desegregation and court-ordered integration in the 1960s, along with suburban flight, led to the economic decline of the Fifth Ward in the 1970s and 1980s. Many wealthier families left the neighborhood to reside in neighborhoods where they were previously barred from living. Business owners saw their sales drop and either closed or relocated to other parts of the city.

After decades of decline, the neighborhood is undergoing revitalization by residents, business owners and the Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation. The non-profit organization founded in 1989 to increase access to home ownership, technology, the arts and job training.

Economic decline, natural disasters and redevelopment have impacted the density of the historic housing stock in the Fifth Ward. Nevertheless, the neighborhood still contains a significant number of late 19th century and early 20th century examples of vernacular and Craftsman-style architecture.

THE WHITE FAMILY

Louis White (b. April 20, 1890, d. November 17, 1967)

Elnora White (b. August 30, 1909, d. July 13, 2002)

Louis White was born on April 20, 1890 in Houston, Texas to Jeremiah White and Minerva Hayes. Elnora was born on August 30, 1909 in Bossier City, Louisiana to John and Mary Jones. Elnora spent her early years in Shreveport, Louisiana. She moved to Houston in 1928. After graduating from Wheatley High School in 1928, Elnora married Louis White in 1929. The couple began working on their grocery store a few years earlier, in 1925.

Elnora White was an active community member. In the 1940s, she began taking part in the dawn of the civil rights movement in Houston. A disagreement in her store with a representative from a food company stocking items there led to her arrest for “talking back to a white man.” She was immediately released, but this sparked her pioneering interest in the civil rights movement. Many individuals and groups that Mrs. White worked with on civil rights issues later became leaders in national civil rights organizations. In her obituary published in the *Houston Chronicle*, she is described as “particularly generous, a kind humanitarian. Very often renters would be behind on the rent and she would let them slide... Neighbors would send their kids to her for counseling.” She is remembered by neighbors and friends as a compassionate and generous woman who helped young and old alike when they were in need. Mrs. White had studied nursing and would treat some of the neighbors’ illnesses when they could not afford a doctor.

On her 80th birthday Mrs. White was presented with numerous awards and proclamations from dignitaries including the president of the United States, the Texas Legislature, the governor of Texas and the mayor of Houston for her pioneering civil rights efforts. The Whites were members of St. Mary of the Purification Catholic Church at 3006 Rosedale. After Elnora White passed away on July 13, 2002, her funeral service was held at St. Mary. Her husband Louis preceded her in death; he passed away on November 17, 1967. Both are buried in Paradise North Cemetery.

Elnora and Louis White had four children: Carl (died in 1984), Louis Jr. of Austin, Chuck of Ohio and Lawrence of Houston. Mr. Lawrence White is the current owner of their family home at 2520 Rosedale, The Lewis-White House. He applied for and received a protected landmark designation for the house in 2018.

LOUIS WHITE GROCERY

Louis White Grocery is a simple vernacular commercial building typical of those built between the 1950s and 1960s. The Harris County Appraisal District dates the building to 1955. Historic photos show the building had a cantilevered, zigzag canopy and triangular, plate glass transoms through 2015. The canopy’s outline is visible on the Lyons Avenue façade. The transoms are currently boarded. These elements are typical of Googie design of the 1950s and 1960s.

An older building likely stood on the property. A *Houston Chronicle* article, Houston city directories and Sanborn Fire Insurance map note that Elnora and Louis White operated a filling station, and later a grocery store, on the property in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

According to the *Houston Chronicle* article, “*Obituaries, Elnora J. White, 93, Grocer, Activist,*” Elnora and Louis White owned and operated a successful grocery store for over 50 years that became a “haven for those who needed credit, counsel and medical help.” It was always thriving, and customers understood that if times were tough the White family was there to help them. The article explained that the Louis White Grocery opened in 1925 at 4101 Lyons at Benson and was considered the cornerstone of the neighborhood. 4101 Lyons first appeared in the 1928 Houston City Directory as “Louis White filling station.” An article dated May 28, 1928, in the real estate transactions section in a *Houston Chronicle* included the sale of the grocery store lot – “E. J. Burke to Louis White, lot 1, block B, Burke Fourth Addition, \$1,500.” By the 1934 city directory, 4101 Lyons was listed as a grocery and filling station.

After Louis White died in 1967, Elnora White and her son Carl ran the store. Carl was a well-known building contractor and a Korean War Veteran. Carl passed away on September 15, 1984 at age the age of 51. The store was leased to others and operated until the early 2000s. According to the Harris County Appraisal District ownership history, the building was attained by SWE Holdings LP in 2004. Ashley Ruiz, the current owner, purchased the building in 2015.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

ARCHITECTURAL STYLES

Louis White Grocery at 4101 Lyons Avenue is an example of American vernacular commercial architecture. In her *A Field Guide to American Houses*, Virginia McAlester described the American Vernacular architecture significance period as c. 1930 to the present. Identifying features include simple geometric forms, covered porches and balconies, uncomplicated roofs, walls clad with one dominant material (wood, stone or brick) and few stylistic details.

Historic photos show the building had a cantilevered, zigzag canopy and triangular, plate glass transoms through 2015. The canopy’s outline is visible on the Lyons Avenue façade. The transoms are currently boarded. These elements are typical of Googie design of the 1950s and 1960s. The Googie elements distinguished an otherwise plain vernacular commercial building.

Googie architectural style is a subset of mid-century modern that originated in Southern California and focused on futurist design. It was a noteworthy style there in the 1950s and 1960s and became popular in other states. The style reflected an increasing interest in futurism and technological possibilities that emerged in post-World War II American society. Googie emphasized exaggeration, such as dramatic angles and neon colors. It was meant for the average, middle-class American and was featured on buildings like coffee shops, restaurants, car washes and service stations.

Houston historically had more examples of Googie style buildings, but few are still standing. Two prominent surviving Googie buildings are Penguin Arms (Arthur Moss, 1950) at 2902 Revere Street, and the Dot Coffee Shop (1967) at 7006 Gulf Freeway.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

4101 Lyons is a two-story structure, with retail on the first floor and residential space on the second floor. It has a side-gabled roof on the left-most part of the building facing Benson Street. The building rests on a slab foundation.

The first floor of the façade facing Lyons Avenue is covered in brick and stone veneer. The ghost of a Googie style full-width, cantilevered, zigzag canopy is visible in early photos (see Exhibit D). There are six triangular plate glass transom windows. The first triangular transom on the left-most side contains a small square instead of a triangular window.

Underneath the ghost of the full-width zigzag canopy, there is one single-pane window and an off-center entrance that contains double doors within an iron frame. Next to the entrance, there are three single-pane window openings that are boarded up.

The second floor of the façade facing Lyons Avenue is covered in painted wood slats. There is a sign centered above the full-width zigzag canopy identifying the building. Above the sign, there are three boarded up window openings under a flat roof.

The façade facing Benson Street consists of two bays. The first (left) bay consists of a single-story covered in brick and stone. There is one 1-over-1 window and an entrance with metal railings. The second (right) bay consists of two-stories. The first floor is covered in brick and stone and contains a single-pane window on the right-most side. The second floor is covered in painted wood slats and contains a full-length sign identifying the building. Above the sign, there are three partially boarded-up window openings under a side-gabled roof.

RESTORATION HISTORY

The current owner, Ashley Ruiz, has not made any changes to the property's exterior.

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The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by [Planner Name], 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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☒	☐			

AND

☐	☒			
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Sec. 33-229. Criteria for protected landmark designation

S	NA	S - satisfies	D - does not satisfy	NA - not applicable
☐	☒			
☐	☒			

- ☐ ☒ (3) Is listed individually or as a contributing structure in an historic district on the National Register of Historic Places; or
- ☐ ☒ (4) Is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

HAHC RECOMMENDATION

EXHIBIT A
PHOTOS (APRIL 2020)
LOUIS WHITE GROCERY
4101 LYONS AVENUE, HOUSTON, TEXAS 77020



FAÇADE FACING LYONS AVENUE



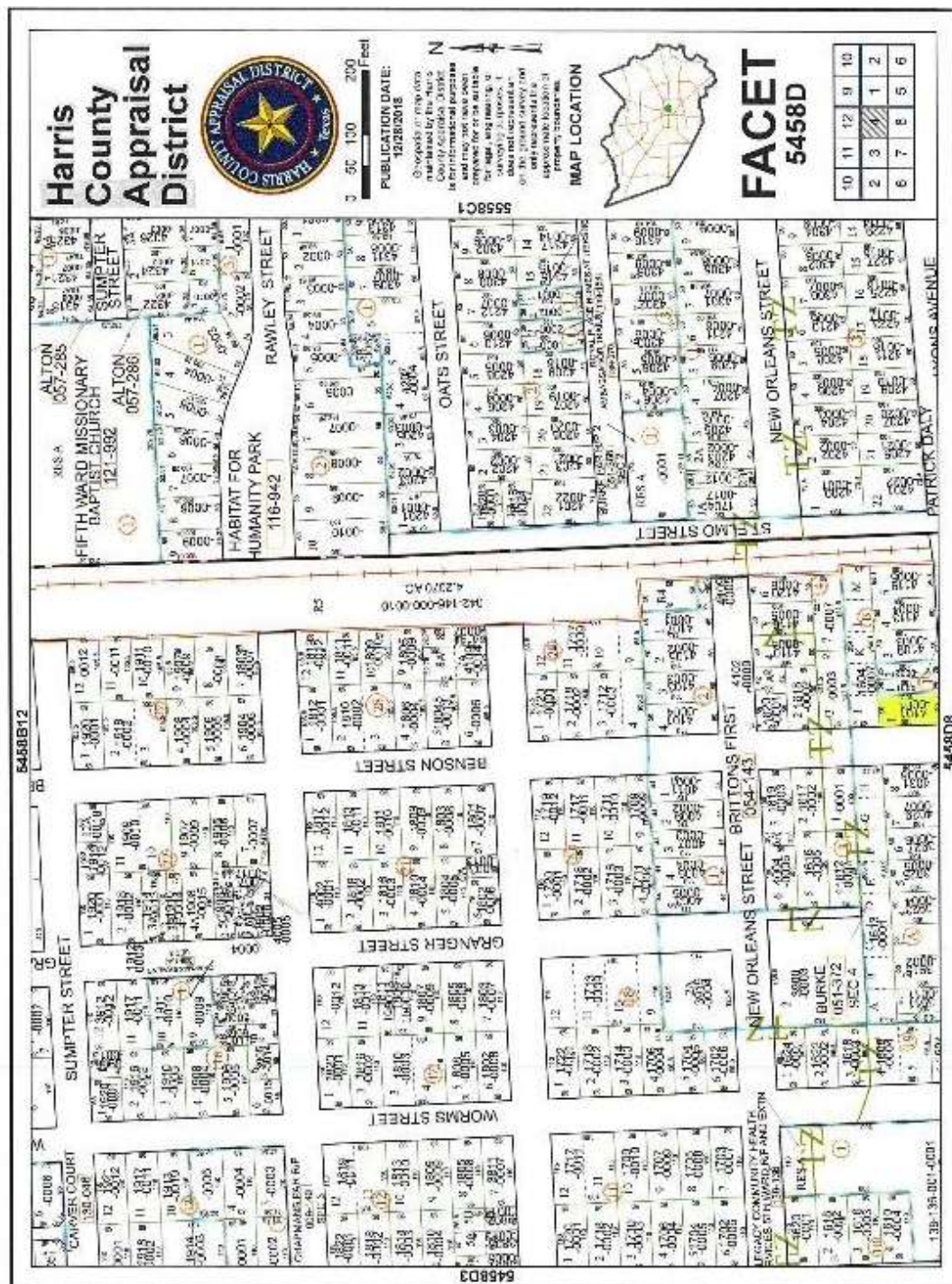
FAÇADE FACING BENSON STREET

EXHIBIT B

SITE MAP

LOUIS WHITE GROCERY

4101 LYONS AVENUE, HOUSTON, TEXAS 77020



CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT C
SANBORN FIRE INSURANCE MAP
HOUSTON 1924-FEB. 1951, VOL.3, 1924-JAN. 1951, SHEET 374
LOUIS WHITE GROCERY
4101 LYONS AVENUE, HOUSTON, TEXAS 77020

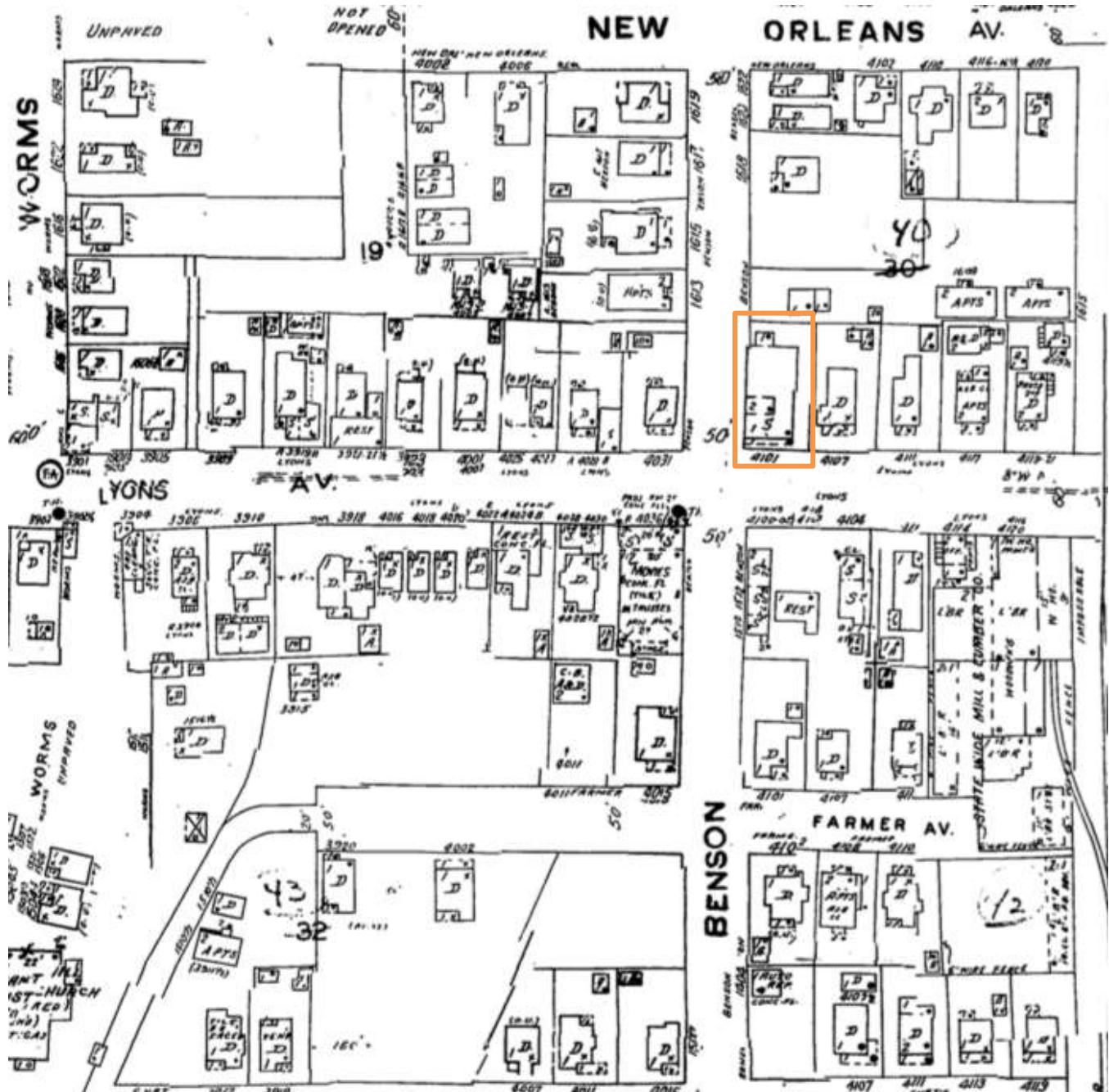
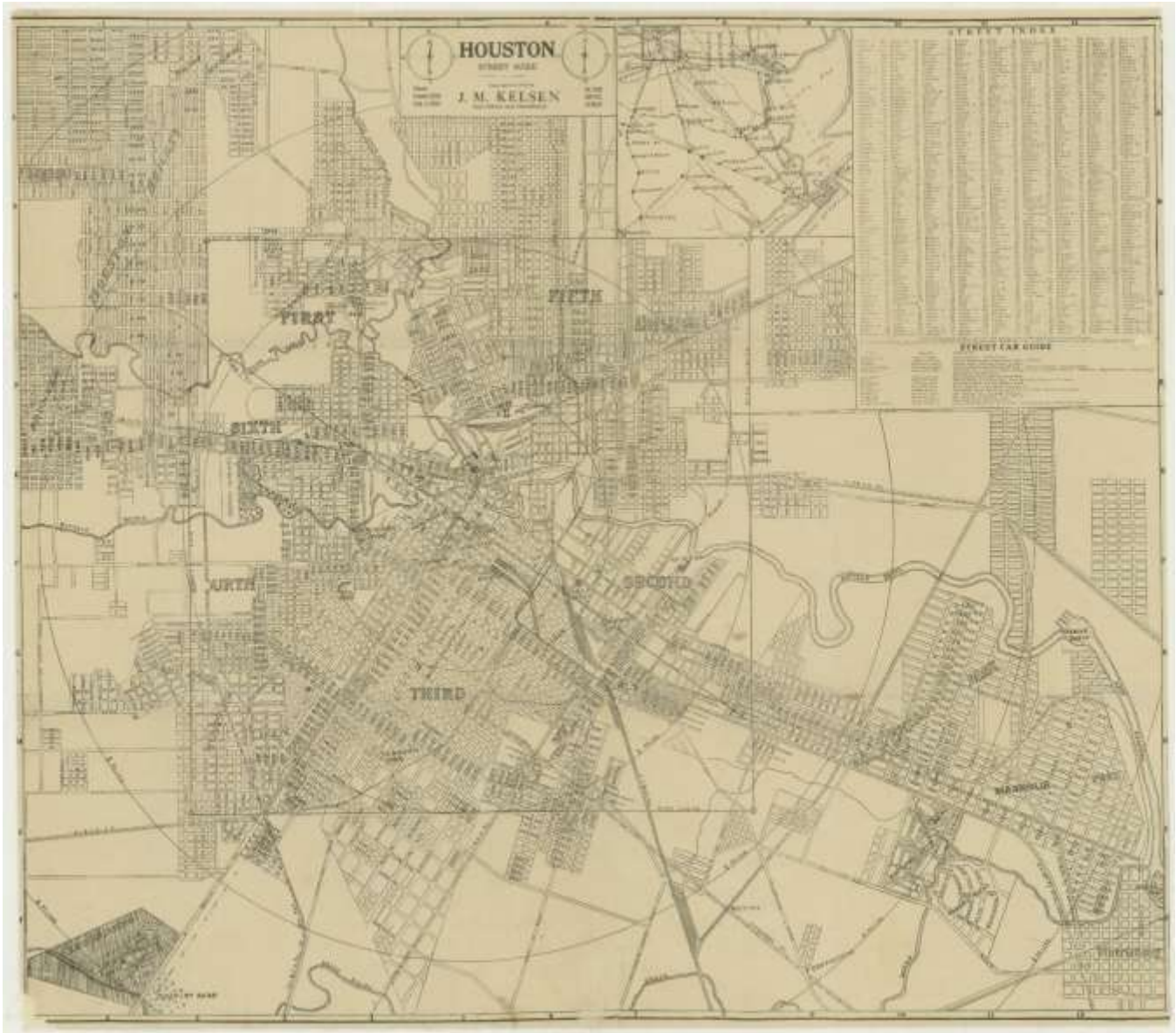


EXHIBIT D
PHOTO (MARCH 2011)
GOOGLE STREET VIEW
LOUIS WHITE GROCERY
4101 LYONS AVENUE, HOUSTON, TEXAS 77020



EXHIBIT E
1913 J. M. KELSON HOUSTON MAP
BOUNDARIES OF THE FIFTH WARD
LOUIS WHITE GROCERY
4101 LYONS AVENUE, HOUSTON, TEXAS 77020



NOTE: FOR ADDITIONAL HARRIS COUNTY MUNICIPAL MAPS SEE
<http://www.harriscountyarchives.com/Research/Municipal-Map-Collection>

EXHIBIT F
HOUSTON CHRONICLE DIGITAL ARCHIVE
MRS. ELNORA WHITE OBITUARY, JULY 17, 2002
LOUIS WHITE GROCERY
4101 LYONS AVENUE, HOUSTON, TEXAS 77020

Wednesday, July 17, 2002 Houston Chronicle ***

25A

Elnora J. White, 93, grocer, activist

By LYNWOOD ABRAM
Houston Chronicle

Elnora Jones White, who with her husband owned a landmark northside grocery that for more than 50 years was a haven for those who needed credit, counsel and medical help, died Saturday in a local hospital. She was 93.

In the late 1940s, White also took part in the dawn of the civil rights movement in Houston, and was arrested for "talking back" to a white man, said her son Chuck.



The Louis White Grocery, at 4101 Lyons at Benson, was "the cornerstone of that area, which was a thriving place. Their customers knew that if times were hard, she was always there to help them," Chuck White said.

The Whites, who also owned

Obituaries

apartments in the area, prospered enough to send their four children to college.

After her husband's death in 1967, Elnora White and her son Carl ran the store until Carl died in 1984. After that, the business was leased to others and is still operating.

"She was particularly generous, a kind humanitarian. Very often the renters would be behind on the rent, and she would let them slide for months. Neighbors would send their kids to her for counseling," Chuck White said.

Because Elnora White had studied nursing, she could treat some of the neighbors' illnesses. "None of them could afford a doctor," Chuck White said.

One day in the late 1940s, a representative of a food company was shelving more items in the store than Elnora White thought she could sell. During the spirited discussion that ensued, the man

told her she couldn't talk back to a white man and had her arrested, her son said.

"She was immediately released, because Father and Mother knew city officials," Chuck White said.

Elnora White also worked during that period with individuals and groups that eventually gravitated to national civil rights organizations.

Born in Bossier City, La., White spent her early years in Shreveport, La. She moved to Houston in 1928 and graduated that year from Wheatley High School. She and Louis White, who founded the grocery in 1925, were married in 1929.

White leaves sons Louis White Jr. of Austin, Chuck White of Columbus, Ohio, and Lawrence White of Houston; and sisters Susie Lewis of Houston and Jane King of Los Angeles.

Services will be at 11 a.m. today at St. Mary's Catholic Church, 3006 Rosedale.

Deaths elsewhere

Siegfried Hansen, an electrical engineer who 50 years ago pioneered the hard spacesuit now used in NASA missions, June 28, of pneumonia, in Los Angeles. He was 90.

Louise Kios Steiner Eilan, a leading Hollywood harpist whose music can be heard in the original scores of *Casablanca*, *Gone With the Wind*, *King Kong* and *The Jungle Book*, July 7, of undisclosed cause, in West Palm Beach, Fla. She was 96.

Benny Peled, a retired major general who commanded the Israeli Air Force during the 1973 Mideast war and the dramatic rescue of Israeli hostages in Entebbe, Uganda, in 1976, July 12, of emphysema, in Jerusalem. He was 74.

Herman Rohrig, who played three years with the Green Bay Packers and later served as an NFL official, July 12, of undisclosed cause, in Lincoln, Neb. He was 84.

Roger Awsumb, star of the Casey Jones children's shows on Twin Cities television from the 1950s into the early 70s, July 15, of cancer of the esophagus, in Brainerd, Minn. He was 74.

Peter W. Selbert, ski enthusiast who launched the world-famous Vail mountain resort, July 15, in Vail, Colo. He was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus last year. He was 77.