

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Mr. & Mrs. Ronald Ellsworth Lee House

AGENDA ITEM: C

OWNERS: Mr. & Mrs. Andrew and Joan Breckwoldt

HPO FILE NO.: HP2022_0046

APPLICANTS: same

DATE ACCEPTED:

LOCATION: 2153 Pelham Drive, Houston, Texas 77019, River Oaks Section 3

HAHC HEARING: 04/21/2022

SITE INFORMATION: Two-story brick Colonial Revival style, single-family 2,414 square foot home built in 1938 on a 7,968 square foot lot. Track 11, Block 43, River Oaks Section 3.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Ronald Ellsworth Lee house is a two-story brick, Colonial Revival-style house constructed in 1938 by prolific Houston builder, Russell Brown. Ronald Lee was partner and vice president of Lee Brothers Oil Company; he and his wife Katherine lived at 2153 Pelham from 1939 until 1942.

Ronald Lee was the son of William Ellsworth Lee, one of the founders of the Yount-Lee Oil Company, a successful firm established in 1914; the company sparked the second Spindletop oil boom. Yount-Lee Oil Company was acquired by Standard Oil Company in 1935 for \$41 million. The Lee family were prominent members of the Houston business community and Houston society.

Ronald Lee's sister, Faustine was married to Houston oil man and developer, Glenn McCarthy. Ronald's brother and partner in Lee Brothers Oil Company, W. Howard Lee, was married to the Hollywood stars Hedy Lamarr and Gene Tierney. Ronald's uncle, Thomas Peter Lee, owned what is now known as the Link-Lee Mansion (1912) on the campus of the University of St. Thomas. The Mr. & Mrs. Ronald Ellsworth Lee House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 for Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

River Oaks

River Oaks is adjacent to Buffalo Bayou and Memorial Park in west central Houston. Development in the residential garden suburb, which comprises 1,100 acres, began in the 1920s through the foresight and persistence of brothers Will Hogg (1875-1930) and Mike Hogg (1885-1941) and attorney Hugh Potter (1888-1968). The nucleus of the expansive subdivision predates the Hoggs' and Potter's involvement. By 1924, Country Club Estates, the section south of the newly established River Oaks Country Club, had been platted, but not developed. The Hogg brothers bought out the original investors and established Country Club Estates, Inc., later renamed the River Oaks Corporation.

Mike Hogg's friend, Hugh Potter, was installed as president of the corporation. Under his expert direction, the development of River Oaks began in earnest. Not only was the existing section developed, the corporation also busily acquired land on all sides of the original Country Club Estates. Between 1926 and 1947, an additional nineteen platted subdivisions were joined to River Oaks.

A study of noteworthy American suburban communities, particularly Roland Park in Baltimore and the Country Club District in Kansas City, was responsible for such innovative ideas as the institution of architectural controls in River Oaks, the levying of a private tax to support a maintenance and services fund, and the creation of a property owners' association to enforce deed restrictions. Will Hogg was especially determined that River Oaks serve as a model of enlightened community planning standards for Houston. He retained Kansas City landscape architects Hare & Hare to provide a master plan that would protect the environmental integrity and natural beauty of the area.

The developers also hired J. C. Nichols, who built Kansas City's Country Club Plaza, one of the first major shopping centers in the United States, to serve as a design consultant. The River Oaks master plan included home sites, a fifteen-acre campus for River Oaks Elementary School (1926, Harry D. Payne), two shopping centers, and esplanades planted with flowers. The plan called for underground utility lines, eliminated alleys, allowed only three intersecting streets and provided rigid building codes. Deed restrictions and centralized community control assured exclusivity; approval of house designs by a panel of architects and citizens and a minimum purchase price of \$7,000 were required.

On March 15, 1926, the subdivision's developers announced a "Room for All Predevelopment Sale" for River Oaks: Section 1. An additional 134 lots were put on the market, nearly doubling the number of house sites offered in the original development. The lots in Block 40 on Skokie Drive (renamed Pelham Drive) served as the southern boundary of River Oaks. The general restrictions for the new tract required that single-family homes be at least two-stories tall with the exception of 13 lots in Block 40. The least expensive homes in Block 40 were to cost no less than \$7,500, while the price requirements on the remaining homes on Pelham Drive ranged from \$12,000 to \$18,000.

Russell Brown Company

The Lee house was built in 1938 by the Russell Brown Company in Houston. According to architectural historian Stephen Fox, the Russell Brown Company was a Houston-based architectural design and construction company. Russell Brown was born on December 12, 1875, in Taylor, Texas, and came to Houston in 1902. The company was chartered in 1906 and specialized in residential design for upper- and middle- class homebuyers. After becoming successfully established in Houston, the company opened branch offices in Dallas by 1916, San Antonio by 1922 and Los Angeles in 1923. Architects who worked for the company included Alonzo N. Dawson, Charles W. Oliver, Mike Mebane and Gonzalo Ancira.

The firm designed and built several homes in Avondale between 1908 and 1925. The company built numerous houses in the Westmoreland, Montrose, Boulevard Oaks and River Oaks neighborhoods and in the Dallas subdivision of Munger Place, and was the general contractor of such notable Houston houses as the William S. Farish House (1925) in Shadyside and the Cleveland Sewall House (1926) in River Oaks. In the early 1940s, Russell Brown retired to his ranch in Juliff, Texas, and the company ceased operations. Brown died in 1963.

OWNERSHIP HISTORY

Ronald Ellsworth Lee (b.8/17/1914 - d.10/19/1967)

Ronald Lee was born in Sour Lake, Hardin County, Texas in 1914. His father, William Ellsworth Lee (1867-1936), was from West Virginia. His mother, Mary Margaret McGuigan (1874-1948), was born in New York, the daughter of Irish immigrants. William Ellsworth Lee partnered with his brother, Thomas Peter Lee, and Miles Frank Yount in the Yount-Lee Oil Company, one of the most successful independent oil production companies of the era. Yount-Lee was founded in 1914 and sparked the second Spindletop oil boom in 1925. Standard Oil purchased the Yount-Lee Oil Company in 1935 for \$41 million, one of the largest acquisitions of the time. In 1916, Thomas Peter Lee, bought the largest home in Houston, now known as the Link-Lee Mansion, for \$90,000.

Ronald Lee grew up in a lavish home on 4218 Montrose Boulevard with five brothers and sisters. Like his father, Ronald entered the oil business as a partner, operator and vice president of the Lee Brothers Oil Company. With his brothers, W. Howard and twin Donald, he shared wide oil, banking and hotel interests. The company was headquartered in the Commerce Building in downtown Houston.

Ronald's sister Faustine, married well-known Houston oil executive and developer, Glenn McCarthy, and was active in the Junior League of Houston, the board of the Museum of Fine Arts and St. Luke's United Methodist Church.

Ronald's brother, W. Howard Lee was married to actress Hedy Lamarr from 1953 to 1958. After living briefly at Glenn McCarthy's Shamrock Hotel, the pair purchased a home at 3200 Del Monte Drive in River Oaks. In 1960, W. Howard Lee married Hollywood movie star Gene Tierney. The couple was active in many civic and charitable causes in Houston.

Ronald Lee died of a heart attack at age 53 in 1967.

Katherine C. Pillot Lee (b.10/6/1918 - d.11/22/1975)

Katherine Camille Pillot grew up in Houston's Third Ward. Her parents, Norman and Sue Campbell Pillot, had a home on McKinney Street. Her father worked as a buyer at a grocery store. Katherine married Ronald Lee on August 3, 1938, in Houston. Shortly after the wedding they moved into their new home at 2153 Pelham Drive. Mrs. Lee was a homemaker and mother of two: Ronald Lee Jr. and Susan Camille. In 1972, Katherine remarried Paul Barnhart.

Aubrey Leon Watkins (b.6/14/1903 – d.1/11/1973)

Following the Lee family, Mr. & Mrs. Aubrey Leon Watkins occupied the house from 1942 to 1967. They raised their daughter, Mary Louise, in the home. Mr. Watkins was born in Woodworth, Louisiana, to Leon Watkins and Mary Ada Ehloe Watkins and was a manager of the Gulf Envelope Company.

Helen Louise Bowser Watkins (b.12/3/1905 – d.1/13/1977)

A.L. Watkins married Helen Louise Bowser on September 26, 1927. She had recently completed her freshman year at the Rice Institute, which had begun admitting women in 1912. Helen Louise's father,

J.S. Bowser was born in Indiana and in the 1920s was working as a salesman at the Houston stockyards. Her mother, Mary, was from Missouri.

William and Dorothy Daniels

The Daniels family lived at 2153 Pelham from the late 1960s until the current owners, Mr. & Mrs. Andrew and Joan Breckwoldt, purchased the home in 2003. Four families have resided in the home during its eighty-four year history.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Colonial Revival style

The Mr. & Mrs. Ronald Ellsworth Lee House is a two-story, brick veneer house with a side-gabled roof. The house is constructed on a pier and beam foundation and includes design elements that are typical of Colonial Revival-style architecture, one of the 20th century's most popular types of residential design.

The house is four bays wide and has a medium-pitched, side-gabled roof with black asphalt shingles and copper gutters. An interior chimney projects above the roofline between the first and second bays. The house is substantially unchanged since the time of its construction and retains a high degree of integrity.

The first (left) bay is covered in brick veneer on the first floor and horizontal wood siding on the second floor. A six-over-six sash window with wooden sill is centered on the first floor. A matching window with brick sill is centered on the second floor. Both windows have louvered shutters. A shed-roof dormer with 10-light window is centered in the roof of the first bay.

The second bay contains matching six-over-six sash windows on the first and second floors. There is a wooden sill and decorative wooden panel below the first floor window. The second floor window has a brick sill. Both windows have louvered shutters; the shutters on the first floor extend beyond the window sill to the bottom of the decorative panel. The fourth bay mirrors the second bay.

The third bay contains the entry door, which is centered in the facade of the main body of the house. Three bluestone steps lead to a wooden front door, which contains four wooden panels and two glass panes. The entry is slightly recessed within a rounded brick arch with horizontal siding infill. The door surround consists of fluted Doric pilasters beneath a broken pediment with finial. There are copper lanterns on either side of the entry. A six-over-six sash window is centered on the second floor of the third bay. It is slightly smaller than the windows in the second and fourth bays. The window has louvered shutters and a brick sill.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ancestry.com, *1860, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 United States Federal Census.*

Accessed January 2022.

_____, *Draft cards*

_____, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995.*

_____, *Texas Birth Certificates, 1880-1982.*

_____, *Texas Death Certificates, 1880-1982.*

_____, *Texas Marriage Records and Index, 1837-2015.*

City of Houston City Directories and Cole Directories, Accessed January 2022.

City of Houston Protected Landmark Report for 428 Hawthorne for Russell Brown History. Accessed January 2022.

Findagrave.com, Index. Accessed January 2022.

Harris County Appraisal District, Real Property Account Information and Ownership Information for 2153 Pelham Drive, Houston, Texas, 77019.

McAlester, Virginia Savage. *A Field Guide to American Houses: Revised and Expanded.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

Newspapers.com, Ronald E. Lee Obituary. Accessed January 2022.

Tshaonline.org, Handbook of Texas, "Gene Tierney," Yount, Miles Frank." Accessed January 2022.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by _____ 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**

- (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)).

Sec. 33-229. Criteria for protected landmark designation

S NA **S - satisfies** **D - does not satisfy** **NA - not applicable**

- (1) Meets at least three of the criteria for designation in section 33-224 of this Code;
- (2) Was constructed more than 100 years before application for designation was received by the director;

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

- (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

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the [Full Name of Landmark Name] at [Address].

HAHC RECOMMENDATION

The Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Mr. & Mrs. [Ronald Ellsworth Lee House](#) at [2153 Pelham](#).

EXHIBIT A
MR. & MRS. RONALD ELLSWORTH LEE HOUSE
[2153 PELHAM DRIVE](#)



EXHIBIT B
MR. & MRS. RONALD ELLSWORTH LEE HOUSE, PHOTO 1974
[2153 PELHAM DRIVE](#)



CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT C MR. & MRS. RONALD ELLSWORTH LEE HOUSE 2153 PELHAM DRIVE, FACET MAP

