

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME: Link-Lee House (aka Administration Building, University of St. Thomas)

AGENDA ITEM: Ib

OWNER: University of St. Thomas

P.C. MEETING DATE: 06-14-01

APPLICANT: J. Michael Miller, CSB, President, University of St. Thomas

HPO FILE NO.: 01L95

LOCATION: 3800 Montrose Boulevard

DATE ACCEPTED: Mar-15-01

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: April 19-2001

HAHC HEARING DATE: 05-24-01

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 1–16, Block 41, Montrose Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site is a three-story, brick veneer residence and two-story, brick veneer carriage house.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation for house and carriage house

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Link-Lee House was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in November 2000. It is one of the most exceptional examples of Neo-Classical, residential architecture in Houston, Texas. Built in 1912, this home is one of the most conspicuous remnants of the early oil era still surviving in Houston. It also represents the opulence achieved by its owner, John Wiley Link, who not only developed the Montrose Addition, but also was one of the most successful real estate and oil business entrepreneurs in Houston's history. It was designed by the prestigious, Ft. Worth architectural firm of Sanguinet and Staats. The house demonstrates the firm's ability to subtly blend the formality of an abstract Neo-Classical design with elements from the Arts and Crafts Movement. Furthermore, it represents a significant departure from the predominant residential styles utilized during this period of construction. Sanguinet and Staats took their inspiration from the St. Louis, Missouri private palace-type residences, incorporating landscaping and park-like settings to create the ambiance of refined country living. The house, with its two-story carriage house and connecting pergola, was constructed on a full block in Link's new Montrose Addition, which was the largest restricted, planned suburban subdivision to date. It faces Montrose Boulevard, which originally was a broad boulevard with a tree-lined, landscaped esplanade separating the two lanes. The home was later sold to Thomas P. Lee, who has been credited with much of the early development and growth of the petroleum industry in Houston. When purchased by the Catholic Diocese of Galveston in 1946, they established on the site the first co-educational Basilian university in the United States and the first co-educational undergraduate Catholic university in Texas. The Link-Lee House was used as the university's first classrooms, library and administration offices. Some of Houston's most influential people have graduated from the university.

J. W. Link had come to Houston in 1910 after achieving financial success in the lumber industry in Orange, Texas. He formed the Miller-Link Lumber Company, which became one of the largest lumber companies in the state. He is also credited with forming the first paper pulp mill in the South. He also served as mayor for the City of Orange. He was instrumental in securing deep water in the ports of Beaumont and Orange, and he established the Beaumont-Orange Channel. Convinced of Houston's potential, Link moved there and formed the Houston Land Corporation. Gradually acquiring 165 acres (eventually 260 acres) in the South End of Houston adjoining the newest subdivisions of Houston--Avondale, Courtlandt Place and Westmoreland, Link named the area "Montrose" after the historic town in Scotland mentioned in the writings of Sir Walter Scott. In

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December 1910 he began development of the city's first large-scale suburban subdivision. Containing a variety of lot sizes and orientations, Montrose Addition as it was first known, was intended to appeal to a range of middle and upper income purchasers. The grandest houses were to be built along four esplanaded boulevards-- Montrose, Yoakum, Lovett and Audubon. Edward Teas, Sr, who later founded Teas Nursery, helped plan and landscaped Montrose Place, as the area became known.

The Montrose Addition was platted on October 4, 1911 by the Houston Land Corporation of which Link was president. Over 1,000 lots were platted and an expenditure of over one million dollars was made for improvements. Deviating from the street pattern established downtown, the four main thoroughfares – Montrose, Audubon, Lovett and Yaokum Boulevards, were drawn on a true north-south grid. The boulevards were landscaped and paved. The subdivision contained 11 of Houston's 26 miles of paved roads at the time to accommodate the proliferation of automobiles. Additionally there were over 22 miles of concrete curbs and sidewalks, eight miles of sanitary sewers, seven miles of water mains and many miles of gas lines. The Montrose line provided streetcar service between the new neighborhood and downtown. With the City Beautiful movement sweeping the country, the area was commonly referred to as "Beautiful Montrose" which also became the title of the company's sales brochure. Within the first year, over 65 homes had been constructed. The neighborhood developed rapidly over the next ten years as Houston experienced increased growth.

One of the first houses in Montrose was Link's own. In the heart of the new subdivision, it was designed in part as an advertisement for the development. This ostentatious residence is located on the corner of Montrose Boulevard and West Alabama Avenue, block 11 of the subdivision, which was part of a 3370 acre tract granted in 1845 to a Mrs. Obedience Smith. The house is reminiscent of the Neo-Classical mansion in Orange that Link had built for his wife, Ihna Imola Holland, and their six children. In Houston Link chose his house to be designed by the architectural firm of Sanguinet and Staats of Fort Worth, who were active in Houston during that period designing buildings in various styles.

The architectural firm of Sanguinet and Staats was founded in 1903 by Marshall R. Sanguinet and Carl G. Staats. Sanguinet, who was twelve years older than Staats, moved to Fort Worth in 1883 and practiced architecture there with a variety of partners until the turn of the century. Staats, a native New Yorker, moved to Texas in 1891 and worked for noted San Antonio architect, James Riely Gordon, until 1898 when he was hired by Sanguinet as a draftsman. Sanguinet and Staats headquartered in Fort Worth and rapidly developed one of the state's largest architectural practices. They produced buildings of all types from factories and large hotels to churches and schools. The firm is best known, however, for its contributions to the design of steel-framed skyscrapers. Almost every tall building, constructed in Fort Worth before 1930, and for a time, the tallest structures in Beaumont, Houston, Midland, and San Antonio, were designed by Sanguinet and Staats. The twenty-story Amicable Insurance Company Building in Waco, completed in 1911, was for a brief time the tallest building in the Southwest. Other prominent examples include the First National Bank Building, Houston (1905), the Flatiron Building, Fort Worth (1907), the Scarbrough Building, Austin (1910), the C. F. Carter Building, Houston (1919), the South Texas Building, San Antonio (1919), the Neil P. Anderson Building, Fort Worth (1920), and the Jackson Building, Jackson, Mississippi (1923). The firm designed in a variety of styles and forms that transformed the scale and style of the state's rapidly growing cities. In addition to large commercial buildings, Sanguinet and Staats also designed a number of large residences, especially on Pennsylvania Avenue in Fort Worth, Courtland Place and the Link-Lee House in Houston. Alfred E. Barnes, an architect and civil engineer from Dallas, who joined Sanguinet and Staats in 1902, later moved to Houston to supervise the firm's work there. He joined the firm as a full partner in the Houston office and served as architect of the Link-Lee House.

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Sanguinet and Staats was one of the first firms to use a large office team of architects, engineers, and other support people. The firm, which had branch offices in Dallas, Wichita Falls, San Antonio, Waco, and Houston, was also among the first Texas architectural enterprises to have a statewide practice. In 1922 Wyatt C. Hedrick bought a partial interest in Sanguinet and Staats. The new practice was known as Sanguinet, Staats, and Hedrick, and the Houston branch operated as Sanguinet, Staats, Hedrick, and Gottlieb, under the direction of R. D. Gottlieb, a limited partner. That arrangement lasted until 1926, when Sanguinet and Staats officially retired and sold their share of the firm to Hedrick. Thereafter, Hedrick continued the practice under his own name in Fort Worth and in limited partnerships in Houston and later Dallas.

W. B. Young Contracting Company built the house at a cost of \$60,000. The great expense for the construction is apparent in the detailing and monumental size of the house. The huge, tightly organized structure is faced with yellow brick, limestone and a variety of colored tile and glazed terra cotta decoration. The dominant features are the grand entrance on Montrose Boulevard and the terraces that wrap around the house on three sides. These terraces are covered by a set of subsidiary porches supported by brick versions of the square columns. The building is a rectangular shape with projecting bays, rounded in the west and north elevations, and rectangular on the south. The double front doors, side lights and transom are paneled with leaded art glass which is gilded. The main block of the house is three stories (except the one-story bay) and the porches only one story giving the house an asymmetrical appearance. The house features a large porte cochere on the north side.

The Links entertained lavishly. The third floor contained a large ballroom where their daughters were married. Link organized the Beaumont Ship Building and Dry Dock Company and Link Oil Company. He also joined Kirby Lumber Company and served as vice-president and general manager. He was president of the Link-Ford Investment Company, the Polar Wave Ice Company and the Polar Wave Ice Rink. He served as a director of Union National Bank, the San Jacinto Trust Company and the Bankers Trust Company. When Link sold his house at 3800 Montrose in 1916 for \$90,000, it was the highest price ever paid for a house in Houston. It was sold to Thomas P. Lee, an independent oilman. He became involved with the Texas Company, and he was actively involved in this company's growth and development. Together with J. S. Cullinan and others, Lee formed and became president of Farmers Petroleum Company. Later he formed the American Republics Corporation and became one of the oil industry's leaders and experts. The Lee family, which included five daughters, eventually found the Link-Lee House too small. In April 1921, Lee commissioned Sanguinet, Staats and Gottlieb to prepare plans for a rear addition. The new space, which was to be added to the northwest corner, over and adjacent to the kitchen, was to include two bedrooms, a bath, a sun parlor and a balcony, all on the second floor. The plan was evidently unsatisfactory, and Lee turned to Alfred C. Finn, who proposed a simpler scheme which Lee approved in May 1922. The Finn addition, completed in 1923, create one large bedroom, a bath and three closets by enclosing an existing sleeping porch and building over the one story kitchen wing. Finn had actually worked for Sanguinet and Staats in Houston from 1904 to 1913. He and Alfred E. Barnes left the firm in 1913 to pursue independent practices.

In 1946 Mrs. Lee sold the house to the Basilian Fathers of Toronto for the first building of the new University of St. Thomas, founded by the Bishop of Galveston, the Most Reverend Christopher Byrne. The University of St. Thomas was chartered on April 28, 1947. The school was originally housed on the first floor of the main house with the carriage house being used as a cafeteria. Rooms on the second floor of the house were used as a chapel and offices of the president. The third floor ballroom was used for women's physical education and for student dances. The pergola, connecting the home to the carriage house, became a favorite spot for students and faculty to congregate and was affectionately called "Tobacco Row." The university's expansion has included a new campus nearby designed primarily by Philip Johnson, who counseled that the Link-Lee House be torn down. When told that the house was the only building of its kind in Houston, Johnson replied, "Yes,

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but there are a dozen in Chicago.” Although compatibly altered on the interior, today the main house serves as the Administration Building for the university.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION:

The buildings have been maintained without little change to the exterior. The grounds, which set the house off from the street, have also been maintained in their original state on the Montrose, Sull Ross and West Alabama sides. In the rear of the lot, however, two one-story classroom buildings facing onto Yoakum have been erected. They are also faced with yellow brick in an attempt to integrate them with the house and its garage.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION...:

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the commission, 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 D NA

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

- | S | D | NA | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | | (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; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | | (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event; |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | | (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; |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | | (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; |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | | (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; |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | | (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; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | | (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present; |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | | (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride. |

PUBLIC COMMENTS: NONE

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Recommends that the Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends to City Council the landmark of the Link-Lee House.

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SITE LOCATION MAP

LINK-LEE HOUSE

3800 MONTROSE BOULEVARD

NOT TO SCALE