

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK/SITE NAME: Palace Hotel
OWNER: Harris County, Texas
APPLICANT: Palace Partners, LTD.
LOCATION: 216 LaBranch Street
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: 05-19-2002

AGENDA ITEM: IIIa
P.C.MEETING DATE: 07-11-02
HPO FILE NO.: 02L0101
DATE ACCEPTED: 05-10-02
HAHC HEARING DATE:06-20-02

SITE INFORMATION

Tracts 1A and 2A, Block 25, SSBB, Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site is a 3-story, masonry brick, commercial building.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Palace Hotel, constructed in the Romanesque Revival style in 1903, is one of the most significant, surviving examples of a building constructed in that style in Second Ward. Although the brick building was constructed more for utilitarian purposes as a hotel, it exhibits distinctive architectural detailing more befitting its name. It is also one of the few surviving buildings of the early 20th century in the Second Ward. Its unique architectural detailing indicates the possibility of its design being attributed to Olle J. Lorehn, a prominent architect of Houston, whose other works (most of which have been lost) featured much of the same detailing.

The Palace Hotel occupies the northwest corner of Congress Avenue and La Branch Streets in the eastern section of downtown Houston. The building, constructed in 1903, is located three blocks east and one block north of the 1911 Harris County Courthouse. In the surrounding area there are other buildings contemporary to the Palace: the Southern Drug Company warehouse, the De George Hotel, the Ben Milam Hotel and the Union Station. Union Station was recently adapted and incorporated into the design of the new downtown ball park (now called Minute Maid Field). The hotel is four blocks east of Houston's urban Main Street/Market Square Historic District (NR)(City of Houston).

The Palace Hotel is located on Block 25 that is bounded by Franklin to the north, Austin to the west, La Branch to the east and Congress Avenue to the south. The architect of the building is unknown, yet stylistically the building heavily resembles the work of Olle J. Lorehn (1864-1939). Olle Lorehn was born in Sweden and immigrated to the US in the 1880s and to Texas in 1890 where he became the second architect licensed in the state.ⁱ By 1894 he had an office in the Kiam Building on Main Street known as "Lorehn and Fritz."ⁱⁱ He was also the architect of the 1911 Metropole Hotel, another middle class hotel/boarding house similar in use to the Palace Hotel and in the vicinity of Union Station.ⁱⁱⁱ Union Station (southeast corner of Prairie and Crawford) was completed in 1911 and spurred a construction boom in the area of commercial projects such as hotels and small office buildings to cater to the business traveler.

"Block 25 was part of the original 1836 Houston Town Plan and is in the third tier of blocks laid out on the south side of Buffalo Bayou in the 1825 John Austin Town Tract Survey, Abstract 1, Harris County (formerly Harrisburg), Texas."^{iv} The hotel was in the Second Ward: Congress Avenue was the boundary between the Second and Third Wards as designated by the City of Houston.^v The parcel changed hands many times in the nineteenth century and important historical figures of the era that owned the parcel included W. R. Baker, Nelson T. Davis and William J. Hutchins.

^{vi}William Robinson Baker was born in Baldwinsville, New York on May 20, 1820, the son of merchant and civil engineer Asa Baker and Hannah Robinson. In 1838 at age seventeen with few prospects in his home town, he left for Houston, Texas, recently founded by A. C. Allen whose wife was the former Charlotte Baldwin, daughter of the founder of Baker's native city. With this connection, Baker became a bookkeeper for the Houston Town Company. In 1841 he was elected Harris County clerk, a position he held for sixteen years (1857). He accumulated a fortune speculating in land and also served as secretary, then vice-president and general manager of the Texas Central Railroad in the 1850s. He married Miss Hester E. Runnels (probably a sister of H. G. Runnels) on December 15, 1845, and their only child, Lucy, was born in 1848. Lucy and her mother both died in 1878. In 1874, Baker was elected state senator and from 1880 to 1886 was

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Mayor of Houston. He brought order out of chaos by reducing the city's debt, paving the city streets, heretofore referred to as quagmires, and organizing an electric light system. While Mayor, he bought an interest in The Houston Post newspaper and later served as president of the City Bank of Houston. In 1888 Baker retired from business and lived a quiet life until his death on April 30, 1890.”^{vi}

“William J. Hutchins, born in Fishkill, Dutchess County, New York on March 3, 1813, came to Houston by October 1839, after having been in the merchandising business in Tallahassee, Florida since 1835 (History of Texas, 1895). Hutchins' first land purchase in Harris County was Lot 2, Block 25 which he purchased on October 12, 1839 from William R. Baker (HCDR: G/330). Hutchins appears to have occupied a house on the lot until sometime in July 1845. On September 5, 1844, William J. Hutchins married Elvira W. G. Harris in Harris County (HCMR: A/329). In November 1852, Hutchins purchased a large brick, Greek Revival, two-story house building in early 1848 by John T. and Eliza Rockwell on Block 25 at the southwest corner of La Branch and Franklin. The house had a west wing added in June 1849 by a carpenter named James A. Fitzgerald. Hutchins and his wife had an extended family that included three children, Eliza's mother and sister from Tennessee, as well as two boarders and needed a large home as more children were on the way. Hutchins moved a house to the east side of his residence in late summer of 1853, having purchased three lots (Lots, 1, 2, and 3) on Block 25 that were improved with attractive homes. One house was moved into the rear yard of the big Hutchins house for the servants as sleeping quarters (see exhibit 2, Sanborn map). The Hutchins family was Episcopalians and attended Christ Church on Texas Avenue at Fannin, a few blocks to the southwest. In 1858, Hutchins was appointed Trustee to Christ Church. In 1859, he purchased an old hotel on Block 15, and built the new Hutchins House Hotel on the block, where the Board of Trade and Cotton Exchange was organized for Houston in 1874 with W. J. Hutchins as first vice president. Active in Houston area railroads, Hutchins purchased controlling interest of the Houston & Texas Central railroad in 1861, continuing to manage and operate the railroad as president and general manager for seven years. He also served as director at various times and held stock in the Galveston, Harrisburg & San Antonio, the International & Great Northern, the Texas & New Orleans and the Houston Tap and Brazoria Railroads. Hutchins was active in local business and property until his death in 1884 in Houston.”^{vii}

Another important nineteenth century businessman that owned property in Block 25 was Nelson T. Davis who was responsible for constructing a cotton compress and warehouse that was completed by 1844.”^{viii}

William A. Burkett, a grocer, and his wife Kate purchased lots 1 and 2 of Block 25 in 1902 and contracted with John Stadtler to construct the building.^{ix} According to Harris County Building Assessment Records the three-story masonry hotel building was completed in 1903.

Sanborn insurance maps from 1885 show Block 25 with the Globe Hotel down the street on the corner of Congress and Austin. The present location of the Palace Hotel building is vacant land. The large house on Block 25 that faces Franklin was the Hutchins house, one of the large houses that were once common in this area known as Quality Hill. Ownership by the Hutchins family of the lots of Block 25 can be traced back to 1853.^x

The Sanborn Map of 1890, shows a two-story frame building on the northwest corner of La Branch and Congress called the Greenwood Hotel. The Greenwood was full service and listed 'Boarding' as well as a 'Saloon' and 'Dining Room' facilities. Adjacent tenants are a cutler, shoe maker and furniture repair shop. The Hutchins house is still at the corner of La Branch and Franklin and other large two-story dwellings now line Austin Street.

The 1896 Sanborn map shows all the frame buildings on the northwest corner of La Branch and Congress as one-story. There is a two-story building adjacent to the future hotel site to the north. Tenants in the shops along Congress include a barber and photographer. In this map Congress is 'wood block paved' and La Branch is 'Vitrified Brick Paved.'

The 1907 Sanborn shows the newly completed Palace Hotel, a three-story masonry building with ground floor retail ['S']. The map notes that the hotel business was located above the ground floor retail. The Hutchins house is still on the corner of Franklin and La Branch and the Globe Hotel is still in operation at the other end of the block. In between a furniture and hardware business has expanded as well as other commercial enterprises. There appears to be a new 2-story frame dwelling just north of the Palace with a bay front and a double gallery porch. This was later used as a hotel annex. The balcony of the Palace Hotel on this map is full width along the south façade and almost full width along the east façade.

The Sanborn map from 1924, shows the increasing density and commercialization of the entire block. The Hutchins house is gone and replaced by commercial enterprises. The Palace Hotel is extant, but its name has been changed and the balcony along the east façade has been shortened. This was either a mistake on the previous map or the balcony was reconstructed following a hurricane or other such destruction. The frame building north of the Hotel is listed as 'Hotel

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Annex.' Also the hotel business has expanded to the west and includes 1413 - 1413 1/2 - and 1415 Congress. It is neither clear from the maps or the city directories if all three of these buildings operated jointly.

Records from Harris County Building Assessment Records note that in 1890 on the East 1/2 of lots 1 and 2, Block 25 there was a frame building with ship lap siding, a composition roof with two baths that was built in 1890. The ceilings were pine ceiled and paper [walls], and the business offered rooms for rent. This corresponds with the 1890 Sanborn map of the same year. The same records list Thomas Greenwood living at 1419 Congress and the Anchor Saloon and Anchor Lodging House/Hotel at the same address.

In 1903 the Harris County Building Assessment Records note a masonry building operating as a hotel and business on the East 1/2 of lots 1 and 2 in Block 25. This record also notes the building was completed in 1903 and the hotel had wood partitions, a wood ceiling and a community bath. In 1907, Mrs. Clara C. Cleere was listed in the city directory as the proprietress of the hotel and the street address first appears as 1417 1/2 Congress.

The Palace Hotel did not retain that name for very long. By 1908 the city directory lists 1417 1/2 Congress as 'furnished rooms' with Mrs. G. B. Hunt as proprietress. The ground floor of the property also changed tenants frequently. In 1908-09 Randal Jones, a druggist, was the tenant and by 1912 a new listing appears for Edmund Viereck, also a druggist. This same year the building is listed again as a hotel: the Hotel Caddo. Tenants of the ground floor retail space over the years included grocers, shoemakers, a realty company, dry goods merchant, several cafés and in 1934 Askew Drug Store No. 5 occupied the ground floor and remained in the building until the 1970s. Some of the hotel names for the upper two floors of the building included: Colorado, Ray, Pettis, Perth, and the Texan. Interspersed with the hotel operations were listing for furnished rooms with women as operators.

Several other important entries in the County Assessment Records include a March 19, 1927 entry for a permit for an awning 10 feet wide and 54 feet deep made by the owner W. A. Burkett. In June of the same year, Mr. Burkett got a permit for one plate glass front with a value of \$1,100. In 1957, these same records note that the second and third floors of the building were completely remodeled and four baths were added to each floor. It is possible that many of the existing alterations on the upper floors date to this major remodeling.

Twentieth century owners include John A. and Cynthia Benson who sold the property to Harris County on May 14, 1999. According to Harris County Appraisal District records, the Bensons acquired the property on May 27, 1993 from the Thrifty Bail Bond Company. The building was owned and operating a bail bond business throughout the 1980s. Prior to the Bail Bond business, the building was known as Askew Drug after the drug store that operated on the ground floor for decades beginning in the 1930s.

Exterior

The 1903 Palace Hotel is a three-story, two-part commercial block, load bearing masonry building located on the northwest corner of Congress Avenue and La Branch Street in Houston, Texas. The Romanesque Revival style building has seven regularly spaced bays on the south (Congress Avenue) façade. The east (La Branch) façade has five irregularly spaced bays. The brick on the upper levels on these two primary facades is a dark red-brown and has a smooth finish. The mortar color is a closer match to the brick color and the mortar joints are very thin. The majority of the building's windows are wooden, 2/2, double hung sash with semicircular, single light transoms.

Elements of the Romanesque Revival style include the rusticated cast stone detailing of the window and door hoods and sills, the color of the original brick and the decorative brick corbelled brackets between the second and third floors and on the corbelled pilaster bases between the first and second floors. The clipped southeast corner of the building with its gabled parapet is another distinctive element of this style.

South and East Façades

The most decorative elevation of the building is the seven-bay south façade. The ground floor has regularly spaced cast iron columns that are only partially visible due to the unsympathetic alteration that filled the space between the columns with a brick wall punctuated with arched openings with fixed, square plate glass windows. Some of the iron columns are stamped: HARTWELL IRON WORKS, HOUSTON TEXAS at their base. The infill brick used on the ground floor wraps around the northeast corner and extends and includes the second bay of the east façade. This new brick is red in color

and has white-gray mortar and wide mortar joints — a contrast to the historic brick veneer on the upper floors and the third through fifth bays of the east façade.

The arched door opening in the first bay has a rusticated keystone and two rusticated voussoirs and is original to the building. Rusticated pilasters flank the door and have cast metal guards at their base. This treatment of the door hood is repeated on the door on the east façade.

The second floor of this façade has seven equally spaced 2/2 double hung sash windows with semicircular, single light transoms. Rusticated cast stone arches surround each window's transom. The arches spring from a decorative molding that is level with the top of the upper window sash - this molding translates into the pilaster capital. The pilaster shaft is the brick of the building plane. On this level, the lower window sashes are taller than those on the third floor. A decorative cast stone belt course with corbelled brick brackets below separates the second and third floors. The third floor of this façade is identical to the second only the windows have equally sized upper and lower sashes. This rhythm of the fenestration wraps around to the east façade where on the third floor there are four equally spaced windows identical to the south facade. On the second floor of the east façade the arched window openings are decorated in the same manner yet the placement of the openings is not regular. The first and third through fifth bays have windows similar to the south façade; the second bay has a sealed up arched door opening that once lead to the balcony. Regularly spaced metal 'L' brackets remain from the former wrap around balcony (see Sanborn map exhibits) that began at the second bay of the east façade and included the entire south façade.

On the ground floor of the east façade, the first bay was unsympathetically altered along with the south façade and has an arched opening with the fixed plate glass window. The second and third bays each have one small window placed higher than the other windows of the ground floor. These small windows are boarded up and have rusticated cast stone lintels and sills. This façade has the original brick with the exception of the first bay. Beginning with the second bay and continuing through the fifth, there is a three course rusticated stone band or belt course at grade. The fifth bay has an arched door opening similar to the south façade). There is a metal fire escape that zigzags along the third bay of the east façade.

Southeast or clipped corner

The southeast or clipped corner is one bay wide and slightly recessed like the south and east facades. 'Pilasters,' created by the undulation of the building plane, flank the clipped corner, a treatment also found on the outer corners of the building. This also was a stylistic element of the Romanesque Revival style and used to give the building texture, interest and a solid massive quality. The pilasters have corbelled bases at the frieze between the first and second floors and they rise behind the belt course and terminate at the cornice. The second floor of this clipped corner has a 1/1 flat arched window with a rusticated, cast stone lintel and sill. Above the window is a band of rusticated cast stone and a rectangular frame with decorative molding. There are three corbelled brackets below the cast stone belt course. The third floor window repeats the same decorative elements of the south façade windows. At the roof level is a parapet gable with a small triangular cast stone sun motif in the gable peak.

North and west facades

The north façade (not one of the prominent facades) shows a different brick type that is laid up in American or common bond with five rows of stretchers to one row of headers. The color of the brick on this façade is brown. The ground floor has one door (not original) in the first bay. The second floor has four small openings that are sealed: the first two are bricked in and the second two are boarded up. These are at the same level as the small window openings on the east façade. There are also four tall arched window openings that correspond to the window openings of the south façade - these are all boarded up. On the third floor there are five arched window openings: the first is boarded up and the second through fifth have 2/2 wooden, double hung sash windows. There are three chimney flues at roofline. All of the windows on this façade have arched brick headers and brick sills.

The west façade, the second non-prominent façade, has three window openings at the third floor. There may be other openings yet the majority of this façade is presently covered with an advertisement board.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION:

There are five entrances to the building: one in the clipped southeast corner, one in each of the first and second bays of the south façade, a fourth in the fifth bay of the east façade and a fifth in the first bay of the north (rear) façade. None of the existing entry doors are original. The ground floor has regularly spaced cast iron columns that are only partially visible due to the unsympathetic alteration that filled the space between the columns with a brick wall punctuated with arched

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openings with fixed, square plate glass windows. The building is in fair condition. The condition of the roof is not known since it has not been inspected due to unsafe access.

The current owners, Palace Partners LTD are planning to rehabilitate the building utilizing the federal Investment Tax Credit program. An application is being submitted to have the building listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the rehabilitation and preservation plan.

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 | NA | S - satisfies | D - does not satisfy | NA - not applicable |
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PUBLIC COMMENTS: NONE

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends to City Council the landmark designation of the Palace Hotel.

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SITE LOCATION MAP

PALACE HOTEL

216 LABRANCH STREET

NOT TO SCALE

- ⁱ Galicki, Marta McBride. RTHL application for the Metropole Hotel, Houston, n.d.
- ⁱⁱ Galicki, Marta McBride. RTHL application for the Metropole Hotel, Houston, n.d.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Galicki, Marta McBride. RTHL application for the Metropole Hotel, Houston, n.d.
- ^{iv} Courtesy of Archival files of Janet K. Wagner, JK Wagner, Inc.
- ^v Courtesy of Archival files of Janet K. Wagner, JK Wagner, Inc.
- ^{vi} Courtesy of Archival files of Janet K. Wagner, JK Wagner, Inc.
- ^{vii} Courtesy of Archival files of Janet K. Wagner, JK Wagner, Inc.
- ^{viii} Houston: A History. Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1942, p. 153.
- ^{ix} Wilson, Ann Quin, unpublished research, Askew Drug [Palace Hotel]
- ^x Wilson, Ann Quin, unpublished research, Askew Drug [Palace Hotel]