

## LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Edmond V. and Maude Whitty House

**OWNERS:** John D. and Laura T. Virgadamo

**APPLICANT:** Leta S. Schoen, Argos Historical Services

**LOCATION:** 124 W. 17<sup>th</sup> Street – Houston Heights

**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** Aug-23-04

**AGENDA ITEM:** I

**HPO FILE NO:** 04L117

**DATE ACCEPTED:** Aug-20-04

**HAHC HEARING:** Sep-23-04

**PC MEETING:** Sep-30-04

### SITE INFORMATION

Tracts 13A and 14A, Block 133, Houston Heights Subdivision, Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site is a two-story, wood frame residential building.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Edmond V. and Maude Whitty House is included within the boundaries of Houston Heights, which was designated as a Multiple Resource Area (MRA) by the National Register Program on June 22, 1983. The house, constructed circa 1907 by a local contractor, is a good example of a two-story home constructed for an upper middle-class family in Houston Heights. As the home of Edmond and Maude Whitty, the residence clearly illuminates the architectural prominence of Houston Heights at the turn of the century. The Whitty family was also very active in the cultural and social activities of both Houston Heights and Houston. Edmond Whitty was employed for many years in administration with various railroads that traversed Houston. Additionally and more importantly, Whitty was instrumental in the early development of serious theatre in Houston. He was very active in the development of “theatre” in the Heights, as well as the *Little Theater of Houston*, precursor to the Alley Theater.

Houston Heights was designated a MRA because it was at one time an independent municipality. Within its original boundaries are numerous buildings, many of which are individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Houston Heights was developed by the Omaha and South Texas Land Company in 1891. It was incorporated later as a city in 1896 and, at that time, was the earliest and largest, totally planned community in Texas. It flourished as a distinct municipality until the residents voted to be annexed by the City of Houston in 1918.

Today, the area still maintains the feeling of a distinctive, self-contained “small town” with its predominantly small, 19th-century one-story and two-story Victorian-era homes, and numerous early 20th-century bungalow style buildings. It also boasts a thriving business district on 19th Street (now predominantly antique shops and restaurants) and a large industrial district west of the business section. Also located in the neighborhood are a number of historic churches, theatres, corner stores, private and public parks, municipal facilities, schools and the City Hall and Fire Station building.

When Sam Bass Warner wrote *Streetcar Suburbs*, he focused on the growth of the Boston, Massachusetts environs which resulted from the snaking out of streetcar lines to the outlying suburbs of Roxbury, West

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Roxbury, and Dorchester, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> While his work uses Boston as a case study, the same ideas are applicable in hundreds of cities. Houston Heights was a paradigm of the streetcar suburb: early on the investors recognized the need for “mass transit,” connecting to Houston-proper.<sup>2</sup> Heights citizens of various socio-economic groups conducted their businesses and were employed in Houston.

Accordingly, the home that Edmond V. and Maude Whitty built as their family residence circa 1907 at 124 West 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue was on a sideline of the Heights Streetcar Service; and Edmond V. Whitty, known as E. V. Whitty, was employed in administration for many years with various railroads that traversed Houston. The residence and the family clearly illuminate Houston Heights architectural style and society at the turn of the century. Additionally and importantly, E.V. was instrumental in the early development of serious theater in Houston. He was very active in the development of “theater” in the Heights, as well as the *Little Theater of Houston*, precursor to the *Alley Theater*.<sup>3</sup>

The West 17th Avenue house closely resembles the architectural style and floor plans of several of the Sears “Modern Homes” models; but it is doubtless not a “kit” house.<sup>4</sup> Identifying markings on lumber used or vintage hardware throughout the house, that were common to catalog homes, do not exist.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the structure is representative of vernacular residential housing of the time and a melding of the various styles done to suit the occupants by a very active Heights builder, Boyd Newbanks, who was in partnership with his brother, Frank P. Newbanks. There were numerous contractors and builders in Houston Heights during this time. Newbanks no doubt erected the building since Frank P. Newbanks held a General Warranty Deed dated August 10, 1905 and a Vendor’s Lien dated July 28, 1906 on the property.<sup>6</sup> Boyd Newbanks was listed in the Houston City Directory of 1907 as “carpenter, contractor;” and the brothers had entered into a partnership to build in the Houston Heights in 1904. Between 1905 and 1908, *The Suburbanite* in its “Houston Heights Locals” column, made frequent mention of contracts for homes recently let to Boyd Newbanks along with trumpeting their completions. Newbanks built numerous large family residences all over the Heights, including a two story dwelling on 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue between Portland and Ashland, a large cottage at the corner of Harvard and 18<sup>th</sup> Avenue, another at the corner of 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and Railroad, and a residence on the corner of Twenty-third Avenue and Yale Street.<sup>7</sup> Maude and E.V. Whitty executed a mortgage on the property with C.A. McKinney, Agent for Omaha and Nebraska Land

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<sup>1</sup>Sam Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*. 2d ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Fox. *Architectural History of Houston Heights* from a presentation given on December 5, 1998. Website: <http://community.rice.edu/focusresources/reference/fox.html>

<sup>3</sup>“R.U.R.: Rossum’s Universal Robots” Program, The Little Theater of Houston, 1935-36 Season, Drama and Entertainment File, Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

<sup>4</sup>Sears Archives. Website: [www.searsarchives.com/homes/images/1908-1914/1912\\_0167.gif](http://www.searsarchives.com/homes/images/1908-1914/1912_0167.gif). Modern Homes No. 167, *The Mayflower*; Katherine Cole Stevenson and H. Ward Jandle. *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company*. National Trust for Historic Preservation. New York. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1986, *The Whitehall*, 278.

<sup>5</sup>Rosemary Thornton, *The Houses That Sears Built: Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Sears Catalog Homes*, Alton, IL: Gentle Beam Publications, 2002, 67-73.

<sup>6</sup>*The Suburbanite*, 1905-1912. Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

<sup>7</sup>*The Suburbanite*, April 11, 1908, August 10, 1907, September 21, 1907, and November 30, 1907. Deed Records, v.197, p75 and Mortgage Records, v.71, p.478, Harris County Archives Annex, Houston, TX.

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Company, Director of Houston Railway, and Assistant Treasurer of South Texas National Bank, located on Main in downtown Houston on November 24, 1906.<sup>8</sup>

Custom-built, the two-story home at 124 West 17th Avenue sits on Lot 13, one of several lots held by E.V. and Maude Whitty, including Twelve (12), Thirteen (13) and Fourteen (14) in Block One Hundred Thirty-three (133) in Houston Heights, part of the John Austin Two League Grant on the south side of the street between Yale Street and Heights Boulevard. The structure is a prime example of vernacular housing in the early 1900s; it is an unusual mix of the Queen Anne, Arts and Crafts, and Four Square architectural styles. The Queen Anne Style, so popular at the turn of the century, especially in Houston Heights, dominates the structure; true to the style, with the prominent bay window at the right front, a common feature which eliminated a flat wall surface.<sup>9</sup> The house is largely clad with wooden, horizontal siding and patterned shingles decorate the authoritative front-facing gable that features a louvered attic vent, originally a window according to a 1911 photograph of the home. The building itself exhibits influences of the American Four-Square style with Arts and Crafts elements, including the prototypical wooden columns mounted on the ashlar block pedestals supporting the front porch roof. The porch roof is accentuated by an unusual balconette. The house also features its original beveled-glass front entry including its original sidelights and transom window above.

The Whitty family owned the house at 124 West 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue until the 1950s. There was, however, a period of time in the 1920s when they did not dwell there but leased it out and returned to New York City where E.V. worked for Southern Pacific Railroad.<sup>10</sup> Doubtless the smell of the grease paint and the roar of the crowd had much to do with the family migrating to New York. In fact, it was in that city that son, Edward, did some acting too. When E. V. returned to Houston, he continued to act.<sup>11</sup> When the Great Depression hit, the Whitty clan returned to Houston Heights. It appears that the rest of the family preceded Edmond Whitty. But by 1935, the large extended Whitty family again called 124 West 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue “home.”<sup>12</sup>

The Whitty clan had initially put down its Houston roots a mere six years after the end of the Civil War when Edmond’s father, young civil engineer Patrick Whitty, migrated to Houston from the Canadian province of Newfoundland. By 1872, he had moved his small family to a home in the Brunner section of Houston and established the *Texas and Houston Land Company*.<sup>13</sup> Mr. Whitty was the first Civil Engineer employed by the City of Houston, beginning his municipal employment in the administration of Mayor I.C. Lord in 1875 where he served in that capacity for nine years.<sup>14</sup> He maintained a private practice as well, advertising in the City Directories of Houston for a number of years.

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<sup>8</sup>Houston City Directory, 1907; *The Suburbanite*, Frank P. Newbanks obituary, March 7, 1908.

<sup>9</sup>Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984, p. 264.

<sup>10</sup>Houston City Directory listings: 1918, C.A. Greaner; 1926, A.W. Epley; 1919-30, P.D. Noessel.

<sup>11</sup>Playbill “*The Royal Family*” an Arthur Case Players production at the Palace Theater, November 2, 1930, Entertainment and Drama File, Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

<sup>12</sup>Houston City Directory, 1931-32 lists Mrs. M.M. Whitty, Torvald, and Walter K; 1935 Directory listing: Edmund V. (Clerk with Southern Pacific), Edward (Eleanor), Patrick T. (E.V.’s brother), Richard V. (Dorothy Marie), and Walter K.

<sup>13</sup>*The Industrial Advantages of Houston, Texas and Environs*. Also Series of Comprehensive Sketches of the City’s Representative Business Enterprises, Houston, Texas, 1\_\_\_\_, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup>Houston City Directory; Patrick Whitty obituary, \_\_\_\_\_, 1908.

“Patrick Whitty: Civil Engineer and Surveyor. Land Boundary questions a speciality. On hand and for sale: Maps of all counties in Texas. Also maps of the City of Houston and all city additions. Maps made by blue print process, photo-litho process or lithograph process. Correspondence solicited. Office: 117½ Main, Corner Franklin Avenue. Houston, Texas.”<sup>15</sup>

Patrick Whitty was instrumental in placing and mapping many of Houston’s streets, parks, and neighborhoods. His involvement in the burgeoning city is evident. He laid out the lots for the Brunner Addition, the Magnolia Addition, Riverside Park, Kingwood, and Clear Lake areas held by Humble Oil and Refining.<sup>16</sup> In fact on today’s city maps, Whitty Street parallels Jensen Drive and the Eastex Freeway. Since the third decade of the nineteenth century, it has been common practice to name city streets for those individuals who were important to either the entire city or those particular areas. Such is the case with Nagle Street, Tierweister, Reinerman, Baldwin, and Andrews Streets, all named for engineers, city councilmen, or developers. Houston, Harris County, and Texas maps and plats of the period abound with the notation “*P. Whitty*.”<sup>17</sup>

Edmond, the second child of Patrick Whitty and the builder of the West 17th Avenue house, made an unusual career choice, especially for an engineer’s son. Early on he fell in love with the stage. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the entire Texas economy was transforming, opening the door for a profitable entertainment sector. In the last three decades of the century, theater became an authentic medium for popular culture throughout the United States and professional touring companies regularly came to Houston and Galveston, Texas.<sup>18</sup> Houston Heights had a polite and yet vibrant theatrical, musical, and literary culture as evidenced by the many readings, concerts, and dramas staged virtually from the nascence of the community. The large Sweeney and Coombs’ Opera House opened in Houston in November 1890.<sup>19</sup> Conceivably it was in this lovely Houston venue that E.V. Whitty got his introduction to theater. He began touring and by the time he was 26 years old, he was a seasoned actor, traveling all over the United States to cities, small and large. In 1902, he appeared as Colonel Carlos Garcia in the opening night cast of *Soldiers of Fortune* in New York City at the now demolished, Savoy Theater at Broadway and 34<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>20</sup> E.V. worked many years for various railroads from 1907 when he began his employment with the Galveston, Houston, and San Antonio Railroad, but he continued his involvement to varying degrees in theatrical productions, as well as nurturing friendships with fellow actors and playwrights with whom he had been associated in his early Heights days.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Houston City Directory, 1872.

<sup>16</sup>Patrick Whitty Obituary; Oral History Interview with Ann Davidson, July 30, 2004.

<sup>17</sup>According to Marks Hinton author of *Historic Houston Streets: The Stories Behind the Names*, being published 2004. Whitty Street appears on maps at the Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library as early as 1904.

<sup>18</sup>Michael John Barnes, Dissertation “*Trends in Texas Theatre History*.” Austin, TX: University of Texas at Austin, May 1993. pp.98-99.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>20</sup>Nicholas Van Hoogstraten, *Lost Broadway Theatres*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1971, p. 67; website: Internet Broadway Database <http://www.ibdb.com/venue.asp?ID=1494>. The theater’s architect was Michael Bernstein; it was built in 1900 and demolished in 1952.

<sup>21</sup>The *Suburbanite*, February 13, 1914. Harry Van Demark, who had become a well-known Texas playwright, hosted his annual birthday party at his home at 319 Boulevard. E.V. Whitty was on the guest list published.

While on one of his many tours, Edmond met his wife, Maude in Sedalia, Missouri. They were married in New York City in 1903.<sup>22</sup> Three children were born to the couple before they moved to the Houston area: Richard V. and Stanley in Missouri and Walter in Tennessee.<sup>23</sup> Maude shared Edmond's interest in theater but insisted that they settle down to raise their small and growing family. Houston was a natural homestead for them since Edmond's father was greatly involved in the development of the Bayou City. In 1907, they moved back to the Brunner Addition, residing at 4610 Nett Street, two blocks north of Washington Avenue.<sup>24</sup>

Once settled in Houston Heights, Maude joined the Heights Woman's Club and in 1916 was a founding member of the Heights Mandolin Club that was ultimately absorbed into the Woman's Club.<sup>25</sup> In the early days of the Heights, "civic entertainments and local shows" were performed at the Fraternal Hall whose deed was executed by one C.A. McKinney, president of the *Fraternal Hall Association of the Heights*.<sup>26</sup> Edmond gave professional skill to many amateur performances along with Fred Minster, Harry Van Demark, Hugh Royall, when he starred in *The Gilded Fool*, which was performed as the first fundraiser for the Woman's Club.<sup>27</sup> The Woman's Club building (City of Houston Landmark; N.R.) was built in 1912 on land that was donated to the club by Mrs. D.D. Cooley.<sup>28</sup> *Mrs. Temple's Telegram*, another farce that benefitted the School Library in mid-February, 1909, also featured E.V., in which he had a prominent part. Later, he played *Frank Fuller, Jack's American friend* – in the primary supporting role.<sup>29</sup> The March 20, 1909 *Suburbanite* contained a notice of "A Roaring Farce" entitled *The Secretary*, being performed at the Fraternal Hall on Tuesday, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, starring E.V. Whitty. Whitty played the part of Reverend Robert Spalding, the Secretary, while the supporting role of Mr. Cattermole, was played by prominent Heights founder and citizen, D. D. Cooley. In 1912 E.V. took the lead in *David Garrick*, a serious drama at Whiteside's Auditorium in the Heights.<sup>30</sup> For many years Whitty continued to act in Houston productions, giving much of his time and talent to the Little Theater of Houston. In the 1935-36 season of that company, he played Dr. Edward W. Griffey, who was Consul Busman and the General Business Manager, in the comedy *R.U.R. - Rossum's Universal Robots*, and he played Ruddock in *Grumpy*, directed by renowned Hollywood director, Cyril Delevanti.<sup>31</sup>

The Whitty home at 124 W. 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Houston Heights was and remains fully representative of housing styles of the turn of the 20th century. A two-story comfortable dwelling, the house was physically

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<sup>22</sup>Ann Davidson, Oral History interview, July 29, 2004.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Houston City Directory, 1907.

<sup>25</sup>Family Photograph, Maude Whitty, the Mandolin Club, 1916.

<sup>26</sup>Sister Agatha, *The History of the Heights*, p. 3 of 7, Chapter Four: Social Life.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.; Handbook of Texas Online: <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/>

<sup>28</sup>*The Suburbanite*, April 15, 1911 and November 2, 1911. The latter is a corrected date to the one noted by Sister Agatha in her work "*The History of the Houston Heights*;" *Suburbanite*, January 1, 1911.

<sup>29</sup>*The Suburbanite*, February 13, 1909.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, January 1, 1911.

<sup>31</sup>Amusements and Drama File, 1935, Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library; Sue Dauphin, *Houston By Stages: A History of Theatre in Houston*, Burnet, TX: Eakin Press, 1981, 33-46.

sited a short block from the Boulevard (Heights Boulevard) and socially located in the heart of Houston Heights culture and life. The Whitty family, like so many other families who settled in the Heights, were middle-class and yet culturally sophisticated. Unlike many of the new Heights residents, including the founders of the planned community, the E.V. Whitty family had strong ties to the development and structure of Houston itself through patriarch, Patrick Whitty.

### ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

There have been minor changes to the home since its original construction in 1907. The current owners have restored many features once lost, including the balconette located within the hip roof of the front porch. They plan also to restore the attic window in the front facing gable that now features a louver vent. Originally the one-story front porch wrapped the house to the east. At an unknown date, this portion of the porch was removed, but the remaining front porch across the façade of the house remains. A spindle work frieze and fan brackets were added to the top of the porch between the columns at an unknown date. However, these elements were not a feature of the original construction and are not appropriate.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### *Books*

Agatha, Sister M. *The History of the Heights, 1891-1918*. Houston, TX: Premier Print Co., 1956.

Culbertson, Margaret. *Texas Houses Built by the Book: The Use of Published Designs, 1850-1925*. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1999.

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Warner, Jr., Sam Bass. *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*. 2d. ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

#### *Articles and Essays*

Volz, Candace. M. "The Modern Look of the Early-Twentieth Century House: A Mirror of Changing Lifestyles" In *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*. ed. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, 26-46. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992.

#### *Dissertations*

Barnes, Michael John. "Trends in Texas Theatre History." Ph.D. dissertation., University of Texas at Austin, 1993.

#### *References and Collections*

*Handbook of Texas Online*. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/>

*Kit Houses*, National Trust Library, University of Maryland Archival Collection, [www.lib.edu/NTL/kithomes.html](http://www.lib.edu/NTL/kithomes.html)

*Aladdin Read-Cut Houses, The Arts and Crafts Movement.* [www.arts-crafts.com/archive/aladdin.shtml](http://www.arts-crafts.com/archive/aladdin.shtml)

## ***Newspapers***

*The Suburbanite*, Heights Houston Newspaper.

## ***Government Publications and Documents***

Deed Records. Real Property Records. Harris County Archives Annex. Houston, TX.

Mortgage Records. Real Property Records. Harris County Archives Annex. Houston, TX.

Vendors Liens Records. Real Property Records. Harris County Archives. Houston, TX.

## ***Oral History Interviews***

Davidson, Ann. Oral History Interview conducted by Leta S. Schoen, July 30, 2004.

Sakolosky, John, City Engineer, City of Houston, TX, Oral History interview conducted by Leta S. Schoen.

**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                                  |  |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | <input checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/>            | <input checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/>            | <input checked="" 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.   |

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark Designation of the Edmond V. and Maude Whitty House at 124 W. 17th Street.



