

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Dr. H. J. and Emerence Ehlers House

**OWNER:** Deborah Salvo

**APPLICANT:** Deborah Salvo

**LOCATION:** 2112 Brentwood Drive – River Oaks

**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** Sept-15-2004

**AGENDA ITEM:** II

**HPO FILE NO.:** 04L119

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

**HAHC HEARING:** Nov-10-04

**PC HEARING:**

### SITE INFORMATION

Lot 15, Block 47, River Oaks Section 3 Subdivision, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site is a two-story, brick veneer residence.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The home of Dr. H. J. and Emerence “Emmy” Ehlers was one of the first houses built in River Oaks Section 3, which was part of the River Oaks development, a residential garden suburb developed in the 1920s by Michael Hogg and attorney, Hugh Potter, who retained Kansas City landscape architects, Hare and Hare to design the master plan. The house was designed in 1933 by Cameron Fairchild, a prominent Houston architect.

It was built in 1934 for the family of Dr. Ehlers, who served as Chief of Staff for St. Luke’s Episcopal Hospital in the Texas Medical Center. Dr. Ehlers and others played a vital role in the development of the Texas Medical Center, which today, is considered one of the finest medical facilities in the world. Dr. Ehlers not only practiced medicine at many hospital facilities, but was also clinical professor of the Baylor University College of Medicine, Board Member of the Jesse Jones Medical Library, Trustee of the Lummis Foundation, Member of the Board of Governors of the University of Houston, and honored by inclusion in Who’s Who in American Medicine. He also had served as a charter member of the 1947 Texas Children’s Foundation, and as one of the Texas Children’s founders, was an integral part of the hospital’s fundraising efforts which led to establishment of Texas Children’s Hospital.

According to the Texas State Journal of Medicine (February 1963), H. (Helmuth) J. (Jack) Ehlers was born in La Grange, Texas on January 8, 1899. Dr. Ehlers was the son of Hugo and Agatha (Sladczyk) Ehlers. He spent most of his youth in Austin where he later attended the University of Texas. During World War I he served in the infantry. He received his medical degree from the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston in 1923.

According to the Handbook of Texas, the Medical Department of the University of Texas had first opened in Galveston “for instruction in October 1891 with thirteen faculty members and twenty-three students. The UT regents added a School of Pharmacy in 1893 and assumed responsibility for the John Sealy Hospital Training School for Nurses in 1896. By 1900 the institution had graduated 259 men and six women as physicians, seventy-six men and six women as pharmacists, and fifty-four women as nurses. In 1919 it was renamed the University of Texas Medical Branch. In a classic study of all American medical schools published in 1910, Abraham Flexner concluded that UTMB was the only school in Texas “fit to continue in the work of training physicians.” Displaying their esteem for both Carter and UTMB, the Association of American Colleges elected the UTMB dean, William S. Carter, as its president in 1917. Throughout its existence UTMB’s faculty and staff have remained dedicated to

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the service ideals associated with patient care, teaching, and research. Expansion of the campus has accompanied expansion of programs for care of the sick, instruction of students, and technologically sophisticated scientific research.” After leaving medical school, Dr. Ehlers first interned at City-County Hospital in Cleveland, Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

By 1927 Dr. Ehlers was living in Houston, where he served in residency at the newly constructed Jefferson Davis Hospital at 1101 Elder Street, which was designated as a City of Houston Landmark on August 21, 2002. The Jefferson Davis Hospital was the first city-owned, permanent hospital facility that accepted indigent patients. The new hospital was named in honor of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, since a large number of confederate soldiers had been buried on the site that was formerly used as one of the oldest cemeteries in Houston. The hospital was welcomed by Houstonians as a medical establishment that could exclusively attend to those who could not afford the luxury of a private hospital. The building was dedicated on December 2, 1924. The hospital had a capacity of 240 beds and was almost completely fireproof, and it was considered by people as “an honor to the city and a godsend to the afflicted.” Within five years the rapid growth in population made the hospital lacking in beds and medical space. Houston’s population had increased 111.4 percent since 1920 to 292,352 in 1930, making Houston the largest city in Texas and the twenty-sixth most populous city in the nation. The city had also increased in land area to 72.2 square miles to accommodate its population growth. The growth in population and the need for more medical facilities resulted in a new hospital building being completed in 1937 on Allen Parkway, and it was named also the Jefferson Davis Hospital (formerly pending City of Houston Landmark designation when demolished in September, 1999). The old hospital site at Elder and Girard Streets continued to be used for related medical purposes, including a psychiatric hospital, juvenile detention wards, food stamp distribution center, Cenikor and also served as a records storage facility for the Harris County Hospital District. Today, the old hospital is the only building of its prominence and stature remaining in the First Ward neighborhood and is being restored as residences for artists by Jefferson Davis Artist Lofts, L. P. Dr. Ehlers, who began his early medical career at Jefferson Davis, was a member of the Presbyterian Church. He married Emerence Truyens in Houston on September 10, 1927. Even though Dr. Ehlers lived in Houston, he kept a foothold in the Hill Country area, near Columbus, Texas, where he owned a farm and raised Hereford and Santa Gertrudis cattle.

Dr. Ehlers had come to Houston during the boom years of the 1920s, when Houston was becoming one of the fastest growing cities in Texas. Dr. Ehlers knew there would be many opportunities in Houston for a young doctor. It was only five years later that he was practicing as a surgeon and was playing a vital role, as were other doctors, in the formation of the Texas Medical Center. According to the article “Texas Medical Center” in the *Handbook of Texas*, “the idea for the Texas Medical Center was conceived by the trustees of the M.D. Anderson Foundation in the early 1940s. The foundation planned the first units of the center to be the University of Texas Hospital for Cancer Research and the Baylor University College of Medicine (now Baylor College of Medicine). A 134-acre site of city-owned property, adjacent to the Hermann Hospital grounds and adjoining Hermann Park, passed to the foundation from the city in 1944, after a popular vote authorized the sale in 1943. The Texas Medical Center, Incorporated, was organized and received title to the land in 1945, at which time board of directors assumed responsibility for development and coordination of the center under the leadership of President Ernst William Bertner. Designed to attract institutions related to health education, research, and patient care, the center assembled staffs, provided facilities, and developed programs necessary to assure the highest standards of attainment in medicine. The various programs were directed jointly by independent institutions. Between 1951 and 1955 facilities were completed for University of Texas M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute (now the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer

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Center), Methodist Hospital, Arabia Temple Crippled Children's Clinic (now Shriner's Hospital for Crippled Children), Texas Medical Center Library (Jesse H. Jones Library Building), Texas Children's Hospital, St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital, and the University of Texas Dental Branch. Expansion during 1959 and 1960 included the Texas Institute for Rehabilitation and Research, Houston Speech and Hearing Institute, Houston State Psychiatric Institute for Research and Training, Texas Woman's University, Houston Center, and the Institute of Religion. During that period the Texas Medical Center joined with Baylor University College of Medicine to activate a joint administration committee, consisting of seven members, responsible for policy matters of the medical college as related to the center. Through the efforts of Dr. Ehlers and many others, the Texas Medical Center has achieved national and international recognition in education, research, and patient care, especially in the fields of heart disease, cancer, and rehabilitation in the last fifty years. In 1994 the Texas Medical Center was the largest medical center in the world, with more than 675 acres and 100 permanent buildings housing forty-one member institutions, which included fourteen hospitals, two medical schools, four colleges of nursing, and six university systems.”

According to his obituary which appeared in the *Houston Chronicle* on Tuesday, December 11, 1962, Dr. Ehlers was a staff member of Hermann, Memorial Baptist and Methodist Hospitals and was a clinical professor of surgery on the faculty of the Baylor University College of Medicine, the University of Texas postgraduate School of Medicine, and the University of Texas dental branch. He was also a member of the American College of Surgeons, the Texas Surgical Society, and the Harris County Medical Society. He was a board member of the Jesse H. Jones Medical Library, and a trustee of the Lummis Foundation, the Houston Academy of Medicine and was a Medical Advisor to the Board of Texas Children's Hospital. In addition, he was a member of the Board of Governors of the University of Houston. He also became the Chief of Staff of St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital shortly after its establishment in 1954 by the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. He served in that capacity from 1957 until his death in 1962. His involvement in health treatment and education in Houston was vast and for his accomplishments, Dr. Ehlers was included in Who's Who in American Medicine.

Dr. Ehlers died in Houston at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital after a six-month illness on December 10, 1962. The funeral was conducted at the First Presbyterian Church, 5300 Main by Dr. John W. Lancaster, pastor, officiating, and Ehlers was buried at Forest Park Cemetery, Houston, Texas. The medical accomplishments, reputation and love for Dr. Ehlers by the Houston community is indicative of those who served as pallbearers including: Dr. Denton Cooley, Dr. A. E. Groff, Dr. Russell Scott, Isaac Arnold, Ralph McCullough, Oscar Neuhaus, Corbin Robertson, Dr. Thane Sponsel, and honorary pallbearers including: James S. Abercrombie, Colonel William Bates, Benjamin Clayton, J. B. Saunders, Edgar Younger, Leopold L. Meyer, Douglas Marshall, A. Frank Smith, Dr. Edward Smith, Dr. Clyde Warner, Dr. John Wootters, Dr. Hector Janse, Dr. Weems Turner, Dr. S. E. Coleman, Dr. Lyle Logue, Dr. A. Lane Mitchell, Dr. Peyton Barnes, Dr. Donald Ruthven, Gail Whitcomb, Dr. Michael DeBakey, Dr. William Seybold, Dr. E. K. Sanders, Dr. David Earl, James L. Britton, James L. Shepherd, Jr., John Mellinger, Dr. George Slodczwk, all from Houston and Charles Stein of Reno, Nevada, and officials and employees of J. S. Abercrombie Company and Quintana Petroleum Company, and also trustees and administrators of St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital and Dr. "E. K.," and Texas Children's Hospital, and also Dr. Frank Parrish, Dr. L. J. Crozler, Dr. Stuart Wallace, Paul Barnhart, Dr. William Senglemann, and Dr. Wilson G. Brown. Dr. Ehlers was survived by his wife, Emerence, and their two daughters, Mrs. Jacqueline Ehlers Goss and Mrs. Suzanne Ehlers Parker. Emerence Elhers continued to live in their house at 2112 Brentwood Drive until her death in 1995.

In 2003 at the 50th Anniversary of the founding of Texas Children's Hospital, Dr. Ehlers was honored posthumously since he had been instrumental in developing that institution. According to *the Days of*

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*My Years*, the autobiographical reflections of Leopold L. Meyer, a very dedicated group of men and women, including Meyer, gathered together in August 1947 with “the unanimous blessings of the Houston Pediatric Society,” and met regularly for several years “to develop a program concerned with the establishment of a children’s hospital.” On August 20, 1947 the Texas Children’s Foundation was formed by George A. Butler, Raymond Cohen, Nina J. Cullinan, John K. Glen, David Greer, Martha Lovett, Leopold L. Meyer, A. Lane Mitchell, George A. Salmon and Dr. H. J. Ehlers, all serving as charter members of the 1947 Texas Children’s Foundation. They often met “late into the night, reflected almost religious zeal and devotion for the well-being of living and unborn children with the aim to establish hospitalization facilities, and when feasible, the field of research would be explored and a ‘teaching hospital’ developed.” As Meyer relates, “I remember vividly all that transpired (in those meetings) and the selflessness in the thinking that emanated from this group. At no point was there the remotest evidence of selfishness on the part of any member of the Board of the Foundation, nor was there the slightest intimation that either personal ambition or material gain ever entered into the exchange of ideas relating to plans or programs.” Proceeds from the Houston Horse Show Association were donated from the 1947 show (a project of the Junior League) to the Texas Children’s Foundation. On June 3, 1948, Dr. E. W. Bertner, President of the Texas Medical Center (TMC), transferred 5.75 acres of their land as a donation to Texas Children’s Foundation. A charter in the name of the Texas Children’s Hospital was procured on March 10, 1950. Dr. Ehlers was one of those people who took time from his busy practice to guide Leopold L. Meyer and James S. Abercrombie, both Houston philanthropists, and charter members of the Texas Children’s Hospital, to some of Houston’s most powerful and wealthy people, whose efforts would result in the creation of Texas Children’s Hospital which was dedicated on May 15, 1953. Today, the Texas Children’s Hospital, an internationally recognized, children’s hospital, is a full-care pediatric facility in the Texas Medical Center. Also, Texas Children’s Hospital is the primary pediatric training site for the Baylor College of Medicine, which operates one of the largest pediatric residency programs in the country at Texas Children’s.

The home of Dr. H. J. and Emmy Ehlers was one of the first houses built in 1934 in River Oaks Section 3, which was part of the “new” River Oaks development. According to the article about “River Oaks” in the *Handbook of Texas*, River Oaks was developed “by Buffalo Bayou and Memorial Park in west central Houston. The residential garden suburb, which comprises 1,100 acres, was developed in the 1920s by Michael Hogg and attorney, Hugh Potter, who in 1923 obtained an option to purchase 200 acres surrounding the River Oaks Country Club. In 1924 Hogg organized Country Club Estates to promote the development. The two developers retained Kansas City landscape architects, Hare and Hare, to provide a master plan that would protect the environmental integrity and natural beauty of the area. They also hired J. C. Nichols, who built one of the first major shopping centers in the United States, to serve as a design consultant. The master plan included homesites, a fifteen-acre campus for River Oaks Elementary School, two shopping centers, and esplanades planted with flowers. It called for underground utility lines, eliminated alleys, allowed only three intersecting streets, provided rigid building codes, and eventually banned all commercial traffic. Deed restrictions and centralized community control assured exclusivity; approval of house designs by a panel of architects and citizens and a purchase price of at least \$7,000 were required.” The first home in the area, built by Will and Sue Clayton, is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places (N. R.). Among the other notable houses is Ima Hogg’s family home, Bayou Bend, (N. R.; City of Houston Landmark) designed by John F. Staub and Birdsall P. Briscoe. In the late 1920s the development lost money, but by the late 1930s developers had invested \$3 million in the project, and the community had begun to influence development patterns downtown. In the 1930s River Oaks was at the geographic center of Houston. The community operated independently for three years, after which it was annexed by the city.”

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The Ehlers selected Houston architect, Cameron Fairchild, for the design of their new home in River Oaks. His design for the Ehlers' home is in the Colonial Revival style, and the simplicity of detailing of the home is typical of examples from the 1930s and 1940s. The current owner has copies of the original blueprints for the house, and they show Cameron Fairchild as the architect and at that time, his office was in the Merchants Exchange Building. According to Dr. Ehlers' granddaughter, Suzanne Goss, Mr. Fairchild was so determined to be selected as the architect by the young doctor, that as a Christmas present to the couple in 1933, Fairchild carved an exact replica of the house as it would be constructed and as later constructed today from a piece of Ivory soap. She further related that when construction began on the house in 1934, workers were lined up two deep in front of the worksite, offering their services for \$1.00 per day for their construction labor skills. Apparently Houston, as the rest of the country, was still recovering from the Great Depression which began with the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Ehlers' granddaughter also related that at times, Dr. Ehlers would perform an operation in exchange for an object of value as opposed to paper money ever actually changing hands, also known as bartering, which was commonly used during periods of money shortages. When the home was completed, it boasted every "modern" convenience, although the installation of air conditioning would come years later. The River Oaks neighbors in the block of the Ehlers were mainly professionals, including doctors and attorneys. Some of the near neighbors included Colonel William Bates, an attorney with Fulbright and Jaworski, Robert Daugherty, a banker with Texas Commerce Bank and James L. Shepherd, an attorney with Baker and Botts. Even the famous actress, Gloria Swanson, constructed and owned the house directly across from the Ehlers. Also located in the block is a Spanish Revival style home, which for many years belonged to the River Oaks Country Club. The club used the home as a residence for the club's golf pro and his family, and even today, the home is still occupied by relatives of the club's first golf pro.

According to research by Stephen Fox, Architectural Historian and Professor at Rice University, Fairchild is best known for his eclectic suburban houses. Fairchild made his reputation in the 1920s as an architect of single-family houses. He designed suburban "country houses" in the Houston neighborhoods of Edgemont, Braeswood, Riverside Terrace and Shadowlawn. Fairchild was especially identified with River Oaks, where he designed also the Lamberth House at 2219 River Oaks Boulevard (1928), one of the first houses built on River Oaks Boulevard, and five houses that the River Oaks Corporation built around the first of the River Oaks Courts to be developed (1936). According to "River Oaks A Pictorial Presentation of Houston's Residential Park," (circa 1930) compiled and published by Don Riddle for the River Oaks Corporation, Hugh Potter, President, there are photographs taken by R. M. Luster of several houses designed by Fairchild in River Oaks including 2219 River Oaks Boulevard, 3244 Ella Lee Lane and 3320 Chevy Chase Drive.

According to Fox, other examples of Fairchild's work include the neo-Georgian style house in the neighborhood of Shadowlawn for Joseph C. Brown, a stockbroker, and his wife Elva Trueheart in 1927-28. In 1928, Fairchild was commissioned also by Mrs. Brown's sister, Sally Trueheart Williams, to design a new house for her in Galveston. This led to a series of Galveston commissions from relatives and family connections of Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Trueheart Williams. Fairchild designed houses for Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Williams' nephew, John Adriance II, for Mrs. Williams' son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. John W. McCullough, and for Mrs. McCullough's cousin, W. Kendall Menard. These in turn led to residential commissions from other members of Galveston's elite living in the elite Galveston neighborhoods of Cedar Lawn, Caduceus Place and Denver Court and on the prestigious Broadway Boulevard. During the 1930s Fairchild designed Galveston houses for George Sealy, Jr. (1930; demolished), Edward C. Michaelis (1931), Dr. and Mrs. A. O. Singleton (1931), J. Marvin Moreland (1937), Benjamin C. Levy (1938), Louis Pauls (1938), and Ballinger Mills, Jr.

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(1939). He remodeled and added to the Brantly Harris House (1939) and designed the modernistic style, Windsor Court Apartments, for Mrs. Hans Guldman (1938). For the Sealy-Smith Foundation, he designed the seven-building, student housing complex at the University of Texas Medical Branch (1955) in Galveston, Texas.

According to Stephen Fox, Fairchild was born in Waco, Texas on 20 August 1902. Fairchild was educated at Southwestern University in Georgetown and the University of Texas, from which he graduated in 1924. From 1924 to 1925 he worked for the Austin architect, George L. Walling. In 1925 Fairchild began independent practice in Houston. He maintained his practice for over 50 years before retiring. During his long career, Fairchild designed a number of public school buildings in Houston, the Jesse H. Jones Library Building at the Texas Medical Center in Houston (1954), several buildings on the campus of Southwestern University, including the Cody Memorial Library (1939) and the Lois Perkins Chapel (1948), the 14-story Houston First Savings Building in downtown Houston (1964; demolished 2002), and the 17-story River Oaks Apartments in Houston (1965). He was responsible for numerous alterations and additions to Trinity Church in Houston, of which he was a parishioner, vestry member, and senior warden.

Internet research revealed that Fairchild also created the designs for the remodeling of South Texas College of Law in Houston as referenced on the website of Spencer Engineers, Inc. Fairchild served two terms as president of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Perhaps one of the commissions most endeared to him was the Taylor Public Library (1959) in Taylor, Texas. According to the Taylor Public Library website, Fairchild was “chosen because of his high standing in the profession of architecture and because Taylor had been the childhood home of both Mr. Fairchild and of his wife, the former Helen Tarkington.” He died in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, to which he had retired, in June 1985.

## **CONDITION AND RESTORATION HISTORY**

According to the current owner, who possesses the original architectural plans for the house, the only changes that Mrs. Ehlers made to the house were the installation of central heat and air-conditioning systems, sprinkler system, enclosing a rear screened-in porch, and enclosing the original two-story, screened-in porch wing located on the right side of the house, which is setback from the main façade. Mrs. Ehlers also added a second story addition over the one-story, porte-cochere located on the left side of the house, which is also an original wing of the house that is setback from the main façade. The addition and the enclosure of each wing are clad in wood, horizontal clapboard siding, feature the same type 6/6 wood sash windows as the original house, with which they are compatible and give symmetry to the overall façade. Each of the outside corners of the original wings feature an original, double brick pilaster which was also applied to the second story addition constructed over the porte-cochere. The house remained vacant for several years following the death of Mrs. Ehlers in 1995. Although the house sold three times subsequent to the Ehlers’ ownership, it was not until August 2000 that an owner, being the current owner, actually resided in the home, and who completed restoration of the home while preserving its original exterior and original interior decorative features.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Fox, Stephen, Rice University who provided the written history portion on the architect, Cameron Fairchild which was compiled from the following sources: George Koyl, editor, *American Architects Directory*, New York: R. R. Bowker, 1955, 1962, 1970

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*Houston Chronicle*, “Funeral Wednesday for Dr. H. J. Ehlers,” Tuesday, December 11, 1962 - Section 4, Page 19, (picture image).

Interviews conducted by Deborah Salvo, current owner, with John Goss (son-in-law of original owners), 3425 Overbrook, Houston, Texas 77027; Suzanne Goss (granddaughter of original owners), 1201 McDuffie, Houston, Texas 77019;

Macon, N. Don, *Mr. John H. Freeman and Friends: A Story of the Texas Medical Center and How It Began* (Houston: Texas Medical Center, 1973).

Meyer, Leopold L., *The Days of My Years, Autobiographical Reflections of Leopold L. Meyer* (1975), Houston, Texas;

Texas Children’s Hospital Developments, Spring 2004.

*Texas State Journal of Medicine*, “Local Deaths,” February 1963 (p. 170-171).

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Wainerdi, Richard E, *Texas Medical Center* (New York: Newcomen Society of the United States, 1993)

Additional sources obtained through research by City of Houston, Historic Preservation Officer, Randy Pace.

## 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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- (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;

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- (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.

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark Designation of the Dr. H. J. and Emerence Ehlers House at 2112 Brentwood Drive.



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SITE LOCATION MAP  
DR. H. J. AND EMERENCE EHLERS HOUSE  
2112 BRENTWOOD DRIVE  
NOT TO SCALE

