

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: J. Vance Lewis House

OWNER: Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc.

APPLICANT: Same as Owner

LOCATION: 1218 Wilson Street (aka 1408 Andrews Street)
– Freedmen’s Town National Register Historic District

AGENDA ITEM: III.A

HPO FILE NO: 07PL43

DATE ACCEPTED: June-27-2007

HAHC HEARING: July-25-2007

PC HEARING: Aug-02-2007

SITE INFORMATION: Lots 9 and 10, Block 23, Castanie Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic one-story wood frame house on a high-raised foundation.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The J. Vance Lewis House at 1218 Wilson also known as ‘Van Court’ is a one-story wood-frame cottage built for J. Vance Lewis and his wife, Pauline Gray Lewis. The house is located in the National Register Historic District of Freedmen’s Town, a community settled after Emancipation that became a thriving center of black social, cultural, religious, and commercial activity through the first three decades of the 20th century. More than 95% of Houston’s first black businesses were located in the neighborhood.

Joseph Vance Lewis was an attorney who moved to Houston in 1901. Born a slave on Christmas Day 1863 in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, he attended college in New Orleans and was a teacher and school principal in East Texas. In the late 1880s, he received a medical license in Illinois, and in the 1890s he attended law school in Michigan and Chicago. He was admitted to the Supreme Court of Illinois in 1897 and was later admitted to the Bar of the United States Supreme Court. By the time he moved to Houston in 1901, Lewis was practicing criminal and civil law. He published his autobiography, ‘Out of the Ditch: A True Story of An Ex-Slave’ in 1910. Lewis co-founded the Twentieth Century Bank in 1919 and ran for district court judge on the Republican Black and Tan Party ticket in 1920. He had law offices in downtown Houston as well as at ‘Van Court.’ His wife, Pauline Gray, a Texas native born in 1874, was a teacher at the Second Ward Public School and Gregory Institute and was the second librarian at the Colored Carnegie Library for a brief period. Pauline and J. Vance married in 1902 at Antioch Baptist Church.

The J. Vance Lewis House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8, as well as being a contributing building to the Freedmen’s Town National Register Historic District for Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The J. Vance Lewis House at 1218 Wilson, also known as ‘Van Court,’ is a one-story wood-frame cottage built in 1907 for Joseph Vance Lewis and his wife, Pauline Gray Lewis. Before the Lewis house was built, the property (then known as 1408 Andrews) was first purchased on November 7, 1874 by Isabelle Simms. According to the 1870 census, Simms and her husband Charles were natives of Louisiana and lived on Clay Street in the Fourth Ward. Isabelle worked

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as a domestic servant and Charles was a wood hauler. By the time Mrs. Simms purchased the property from H.H. and Frances F. Dooley, she had been widowed. Her pastor, Reverend Jack Yates, influenced her to buy the property, and after earning enough money, she gave the money to Reverend Yates to buy the land for her.

In 1896, Isabelle conveyed the northeast portion of the property to Pauline Gray, who lived behind her at 1216 Wilson. Ms. Gray was born in Texas in 1874 and moved to the Fourth Ward with her mother Mary Gray and grandmother Rosa Williams in the late 1870s. She taught at the Second Ward Public School, Gregory Institute and was the second librarian at the Colored Carnegie Library for a brief period.

In 1902, Pauline married J. Vance Lewis, an attorney who moved to Houston in 1901. The ceremony was held at Antioch Baptist Church and officiated by Reverend F.L. Lights. Mr. Lewis, who was born a slave on Christmas Day in 1863, was a native of Terrabonne Parish, Louisiana. He attended college at Leland University in New Orleans, earned a teaching certificate from the Normal School in Orange, Texas, and taught school and became a principal in Angelina County. In the late 1880s, the State Board of Illinois granted him a license to practice medicine. Lewis decided to further his education and enrolled in Lincoln University in Pennsylvania for two terms. A trip to several courthouses in New York changed his plans, though, when he witnessed a trial of a black man being defended by a black lawyer in Buffalo, New York. Lewis was so impressed with the defense strategy of the lawyer that after the close of the trial Lewis questioned him about becoming a lawyer himself. In 1894, Lewis attended law school in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and at the Chicago College of Law, and was admitted to the Supreme Court of Illinois in 1897. He then applied to the bar of the United States Supreme Court and was admitted 10 days later. By the time he moved to Houston in 1901, he was practicing criminal and civil law. He published his autobiography, 'Out of the Ditch: A True Story of An Ex-Slave' in 1910. In 1919, he co-founded Twentieth Century Bank and in 1920 ran for district judge on the Republican Black and Tan Party ticket.

The Lewis house, located in the National Register Historic District of Freedmen's Town (1985) is listed as a contributing property of high significance. J. Vance Lewis built the home in 1907. The cost to build it was \$2800 according to a mechanic's lien dated August 26, 1907. Isabelle Simms' house on the site was torn down in the process and she moved to 1216 Wilson with Pauline Gray Lewis' grandmother and mother.

After the Civil War this area just on the southwestern fringe of Houston was where emancipated slaves congregated. New and existing subdivisions, such as Seneshal Addition (1848) and the Justin Castanie Addition (1848), two G.S. Hardcastle Additions, and three other real estate developments undertaken by William R. Baker, accommodated this settlement. As early as the 1880s this district was referred to as Freedmantown. It lay on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou, across from the W.R. Baker Addition in the First Ward (later Sixth Ward, as it became named after redistricting in 1876). In the early 1900s, Freedmen's Town encompassed an area bounded by Buffalo Bayou, Sutton Street, Taft Street, and Prairie Street downtown. Today, the boundaries have been reduced to Taft, Heiner, West Dallas, and West Gray Streets.

The San Felipe streetcar ran parallel to Lewis' home as it headed north on Wilson Street. During the years from 1920 until his death in 1925, he used Van Court as his law office. The home was

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featured in the Houston Informer Newspaper advertising his law practice. Previously, his law office was located in several prominent African American buildings downtown.

After the death of J. Vance Lewis in 1925, Pauline continued to live in the house. She remarried twice, first to Leonce Lubin, also a teacher, and later to Samuel Byars, a welder by trade. Mrs. Lewis died on December 26, 1963.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The J. Vance Lewis House was listed as a contributing property of high significance in the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District designated in 1985. 'Van Court' is a square-planned, pyramid-roofed late Victorian cottage with hipped- and gable-roofed wings projecting from three of its four corners. An L-plan gallery wraps around the east (front) and south facades of the house. Tapered wood columns on brick piers support the low-pitched gallery roof. Large, one-over-one-pane plate glass windows, considered very modern for their time, give the Wilson Street façade of the house imposing scale. The interior of the house has fifteen-foot ceilings, pine flooring, wainscoting, crown molding, gingerbread trim on the kitchen cabinets, and etched glass door windows.

After the death of Mrs. Lewis Lubin Byars in 1963, the house was bequeathed to Johnnie Route whom she considered a son. In 1966, Route sold the house to Joseph M. Fillipone, who used it as rental property. In February 2007, the house was purchased by the Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum, Inc. No significant architectural modifications have been made to the exterior of the house.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Harris County Deed Records, Volume 66, p. 97, 130, Volume 98, p. 417, Volume 107, p. 422.

Houston City Directories, 1870-1949.

Sanborn Fire Insurance maps for Houston, 1896, 1907.

United States Census, 1880, Galveston County, Texas.

United States Census, 1880, Harris County, Texas.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Thomas McWhorter, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

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S NA

S - satisfies NA - not applicable

Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-229(a)(1):

- (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;
- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;
- (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;
- (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;
- (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;
- (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;
- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.

AND

- (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b).

OR

- The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2);

OR

- The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3);

OR

- The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4).

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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to Houston City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the J. Vance Lewis House at 1218 Wilson Street.

SITE LOCATION MAP J. Vance Lewis House 1218 Wilson Street

