

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Thomas H. Monroe House
OWNERS: Carson T. and Arthur A. Seeligson, III
APPLICANTS: Carson T. and Arthur A. Seeligson, III
LOCATION: 1624 Kirby Drive - River Oaks
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: II.a
HPO FILE NO: 08L203
DATE ACCEPTED: Apr-29-08
HAHC HEARING: Jun-12-08
PC HEARING: Jun-19-08

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 2, Block 33, River Oaks Section 1, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site includes a two-story, brick residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Thomas H. Monroe House at 1624 Kirby Drive, built in 1931, was designed by Joseph Finger, a distinguished Houston architect. The two-story brick house is Mediterranean Revival in style, and features a green tile roof and formal gardens. Thomas H. Monroe spent most of his career working for the Jim M. West family and is best known for his work in developing Hermann Hospital while serving as a trustee of the Hermann Estate. Joseph Finger was an important Houston architect who designed such iconic buildings as Houston City Hall, the Lancaster Hotel, and the 1940 Houston Municipal Airport Terminal and Hangar. The Thomas H. Monroe House qualifies for Landmark Designation under Criteria 1, 3, 4, and 6.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The house at 1624 Kirby Drive was designed by Joseph Finger for Thomas H. Monroe. Monroe worked for Jim M. West, and Finger designed homes for a number of West family members and business associates.

The first mention of the house occurred in November 4, 1928, in the *Houston Post*:

“Monroe Builds \$50,000 Home – T.H. Monroe, president of West Securities Company and an official of various other West interests, has commissioned Joseph Finger, local architect, to prepare plans for a \$50,000 home to be built in River Oaks. The residence will be of brick veneer construction, very elaborately appointed, with tile roof.”

Construction of the house started in January 1931 with Benson-Hall serving as contractors. Upon completion of the home in May 1931, the following article, found in the River Oaks Scrapbooks, was published. It is not labeled but probably came from the *Houston Post* or *Houston Chronicle* in May 1931, and the writer incorrectly states the owners' and architect's names:

“Munroe Residence in River Oaks is Complete – The new home of Mr. and Mrs. T.H. Munroe at 1624 Kirby Drive in River Oaks was completed Wednesday by the Benson Hall Construction Company... the home was designed by A.C. Finn, architect. Mr. Munroe is vice president of West Securities Co.”

Architectural historian Stephen Fox has identified Joseph Finger as the correct architect, and mentions the West family/Finger connection as important.

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Thomas Hedges Monroe was born on December 4, 1889, in Iola, Grimes County, Texas. He started his career at the turn of the century in Houston with Southern Pacific Railroad. In 1909, he moved to Central Bank & Trust Co. (later MBank) and then to Thompson-Truckee Lumber Company. Later, he joined J.M. West Interests as Secretary Treasurer. In the 1932-33 City Directory, Monroe is listed as President of West Securities Co. and West Mortgage Co.; and Vice President of South Texas Lumber Co., West Lumber Co., West Production Co. and Reynolds-West Lumber Co. with offices in the Sterling Building. He served the West family for many years, including as a Trustee for the West Foundation.

James Marion West (1871-1941) was a prominent rag-to-riches Houston businessman, who made his fortune in lumber, oil, banking and ranching. A portion of West's 35,000-acre ranch, located midway between Houston and Galveston, became the site of NASA in the 1960s.

Born in Mississippi in May 1871, West moved to Trinity County, Texas, in 1880, where his family established a family farm. At age 14, he began working at a local sawmill. West gradually accumulated his own timber lands and established the West Lumber Company in the mid 1890s. By the early 1920s, West controlled a substantial part of the lumber industry in East Texas and Louisiana. West moved to Houston in 1905, and as the lumber industry began to slow down, West diversified his business interests to banking, ranching, real estate, and the emerging oil industry.

In the early 1920s, West began to accumulate land on the north bend of Clear Lake in southeast Harris County for his ranch. He hired Houston architect Joseph Finger to design a large house on the ranch that faced Clear Lake. The 17,000-square foot Italian renaissance revival house, which became known as the West Mansion (National Register, RTHL), was built in 1928-29, and is located on what is now known as NASA Road 1 in Webster. In 1939 West sold most of his property, including the West Mansion, to the Humble Oil Company, which donated it to Rice University in 1941. In 1961, Rice turned over 1,600 acres to NASA for the site of the Manned Spacecraft Center. In 1968, the West Mansion was restored with a \$580,000 grant from NASA to the National Academy of Science. The West Mansion today is considered an 'endangered' historic property.

West also served in many social, civic, and business positions. In 1938 he established the West Foundation, the funds of which were to be devoted to religious, charitable, educational, literary, and scientific purposes. He purchased the Dallas Journal and Austin Tribune after the Texas Senate failed to confirm him as chairman of the Texas Highway Commission in 1939.

James and his wife Jessie had three children, James Marion West, Jr. ("Silver Dollar Jim"), Wesley Wendell West, and Mildred. "Silver Dollar Jim" was an eccentric attorney, oilman, and cattle rancher, and real-life version of the stereotypical flamboyant Texas millionaire found in jokes, cartoons, and movies.

In addition to his business interests with Jim West, T. H. Monroe served as a Trustee to the Hermann Estate from August 1935 until November 1963, when he retired as Chairman of the Board. Monroe probably had the greatest impact on Houston through his role as a Hermann Estate Trustee. At his death in 1986 at the age of 97, the Houston Chronicle noted his passing with an article "Services Set for Longtime Hermann Estate Trustee Thomas Monroe." The article stated "much of the growth of the hospital (Hermann) to its present status occurred under his leadership." Monroe's obituary lists his other activities, including serving as director of the Old First City Bank, and later First City National Bank, and as a founding member of St. Paul's Methodist Church.

Monroe owned the house at 1624 Kirby Drive for almost 50 years. Around 1980, the house was purchased by James Kempner, who split the original double lot of the home into two properties. A new house, 2910 Inwood, was built on Lot 1 at the corner of Kirby and Inwood. Around 1984, 1624 Kirby was purchased by John M. Sullivan, who sold the house to the current owners, the Seeligsons, in 2003.

Joseph Finger (1887-1953) was the architect of the house at 1624 Kirby Drive. According to the *Handbook of Texas* online:

“Joseph Finger, architect, was born on March 7, 1887, in Bielitz, Austria, the son of Hani (Steifter) and Henri Finger. Finger received his primary, secondary, and technical education in Bielitz. Immigrating to the United States in 1905, Finger settled initially in New Orleans. He moved to Houston in 1908, where he worked in the branch office of the Dallas architect C. D. Hill and Company. In 1912 Finger became the junior partner of Houston architect Lewis Sterling Green. Between 1914 and 1919 he was in partnership with James Ruskin Bailey and from 1920 to 1923 with Lamar Q. Cato. From 1923 to 1944 Finger practiced under his own name. From 1944 until his death he was in partnership with George W. Rustay. From the beginning of his first partnership, Finger was identified with the design of office, hotel, retail, and industrial buildings. He was responsible for the American National Insurance Company Building in Galveston (1913, demolished); the Ricou-Brewster Building in Shreveport, Louisiana (1924, with Seymour Van Os); the De George (1913), Plaza (1925), Ben Milam (1925), Auditorium (1926), and Texas State hotels in Houston (1929); the Vaughn Hotel, Port Arthur (1929); the Charlton Hotel, Lake Charles, Louisiana (1929); and the McCartney Hotel, Texarkana (1930). Finger designed retail stores for Everitt-Buelow (1926, altered), Levy's (1930, altered), and Battelstein's (1923, 1936, 1950) in Houston, and numerous auto showrooms in Houston during the 1920s. He was architect of the Model Laundry, Galveston (ca. 1913); and the Cheek-Neal Coffee Company (1917), Texas Packing Company (1924), H. M. Tennison Manufacturing Company (1925), and Truscon Steel Company (1941) buildings in Houston.

As the city's foremost Jewish architect from the 1910s through the 1940s, Finger designed many Jewish institutional buildings, as well as buildings for individual Jewish clients. Among these were Congregation Beth Israel Temple (1925), Congregation Beth Israel Mausoleum (1935), and Congregation Beth Yeshurun Synagogue (1949), as well as the Concordia Club (1915, demolished) and the Wolff Memorial Home (1930, demolished). During the 1930s Finger was responsible for such major public buildings as the Montgomery County Courthouse, Conroe (1935, altered); Jefferson Davis Hospital (1937, with Alfred C. Finn); Houston City Hall (1939); and the Houston Municipal Airport Terminal and Hangar (1940). At the time of his death, Finger and Rustay's Harris County Courthouse (1953) was under construction in Houston. Finger was best known for his exuberant modernistic designs. These included the Art Deco-style Houston Turn-Verein (1929, demolished), the A. C. Burton Company auto showroom (1929, demolished), and the Barker Brothers Studio (1930). Finger's office produced the Clarke and Courts printing plant (1936) and the Carnation Company creamery (1946-47, demolished) in the streamlined modernistic style. Finger's public buildings of the 1930s and 1940s were also designed in the modernistic style. Among the prominent clients for whom Finger designed multiple buildings, for both personal and business use, were the industrialist Henry M. Tennison, the confectioner W. H. Irvin, the merchant Philip Battelstein and his sons, the grocer Joseph Weingarten and his brothers, and the oil operator James M. West and his sons and business associates.

Finger married Gertrude Levy of Houston on June 18, 1913. They were the parents of one son, Joseph Seifter Finger, a landscape architect and golf course designer. Finger was a member of the American Institute of Architects. He was also a member of Congregation Beth Israel, the Independent Order of B'nai Brith, the Houston Turn-Verein, the Westwood Country Club, Chamber of Commerce, and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. Joseph Finger died on February 6, 1953, in Houston. He is buried in Beth Israel Mausoleum in Beth Israel Cemetery, Houston.”

According to Stephen Fox, additional Joseph Finger works include:

- J. A. Platt House at 3311 Del Monte and River Oaks Boulevard.
- J. M. West, Jr., House at 1909 River Oaks Boulevard between Chevy Chase and San Felipe (demolished).
- Cohen Building, 2935-2925 Main Street, 1925.
- Citizens State Bank Building (now Rockefellers), 3620 Washington Avenue, 1925.
- Lancaster Hotel (then Auditorium Hotel), 701 Texas Avenue, 1926.
- Joseph Finger duplex, 120 Portland, 1926.
- W.H. Irvin Home, 431 Bay Ridge Road, 1928.
- Texas State Hotel, 720 Fannin Street, 1929.
- Jim West country home, 3303 NASA Road 1, 1929.
- Residence at 2221 Rosedale Avenue, 1929.
- Stephen F. Austin High School 1700 Dumble Street, 1937 (w/Briscoe, Sullivan and Sam Dixon, Jr.).
- Residence at 3612 Parkwood Drive, 1938.
- Weingarten Home, 4000 South McGregor Way, 1939.
- Parker Bros. & Co. Building, 5303 Navigation Boulevard, 1939.
- Kelley Manufacturing Co. Building, Japhet Street, 1939.
- Residence at 3615 Parkwood Drive, 1940.
- Republic Steel Corporation Building, 501 North Greenwood Street, 1941.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Thomas H. Monroe House was designed in the Mediterranean Revival style. It is a two-story home with painted brick veneer and a green tile hipped roof. The symmetrical main body of the house is five bays wide, with two arched windows on each side of a centered main entrance and five windows on the second floor. On the ends of the house are two wings that are perfectly balanced. On the south wing, an elegant double doorway with its original glass detail leads to a small patio. On the north side, a similar archway tops a carport. The recessed front door and entry porch is framed by an archway accented by two stone columns. Above the archway is intricate fan-shaped ironwork that is repeated on the balcony above the entrance.

The current owners were drawn to the home because of its unique architecture, old world sensibilities, and formal gardens, which are similar in feel to the homes built in the 1920s in San Antonio, where Arthur Seeligson, one of the current owners, was born and raised. The current owners completed a major renovation, which including reversing numerous unsympathetic changes made by a previous owner. The

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renovation included the expansion of the kitchen; renovation of closets, bathrooms, butler's pantry; restoration of the flooring; installation of new a/c and plumbing; remodeling of an accessory building; and upgrades to the landscaping and exterior lighting. No changes were made to the original facade of the house.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fox, Stephen, ed., *Houston Architectural Guide*, 2nd edition, American Institute of Architects/Houston Chapter, 1999.

Handbook of Texas Online, s.v. ", " <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/FF/ffi37.html> (accessed May 5, 2008).

Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/WW/fwe33.html>.

Houston Chronicle, Obituary of T.H. Monroe, December 18, 1986.

Houston Chronicle, "Services set for longtime Hermann Estate Trustee", December 18, 1986.

Houston Post, "Monroe builds \$50,000 Home," November 4, 1928.

River Oaks Scrapbook, Volume 10, page 216.

West Mansion, National Register Designation Application.

www.houstonhistory.com/ghoustonians/history8bb.htm+silver+dollar+jim+west&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us.

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

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

The HAHC and the Planning 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	NA - not applicable
<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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(1);		
<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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(2);		
<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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(3);		
<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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(4);		
<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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(5);		

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- (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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(6));
- (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present (Sec. 33-224(a)(7));
- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride (Sec. 33-224(a)(8)).
- (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)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark Designation of the Thomas H. Monroe House at 1624 Kirby Drive.

THOMAS H. MONROE HOUSE
1624 KIRBY DRIVE



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SITE LOCATION MAP
THOMAS H. MONROE HOUSE
1624 KIRBY DRIVE
NOT TO SCALE

