

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Pauline Gray Lewis House

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

APPLICANT: Same as Owner

LOCATION: 1216 Wilson Street – Freedmen’s Town National Register Historic District

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: VIII.d

HPO FILE NO: 08PL51

DATE ACCEPTED: Dec-28-07

HAHC HEARING: Jan-30-08

PC HEARING: Feb-14-08

SITE INFORMATION:

Lots 9 & 10, Block 23, Castanie Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic one-story wood frame house.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Pauline Gray Lewis House, located at 1216 Wilson in the Freedmen’s Town National Register Historic District, is a one-story wood frame cottage built in 1907. The house is located on the north half of the former homestead of Pauline Gray Lewis and her husband, J. Vance Lewis. Located next door at 1218 Wilson Street, on the south half of the property, is the J. Vance Lewis House, a City of Houston Protected Landmark designated in 2007. Pauline Gray Lewis was a teacher at the Second Ward Public School, the Green Pond School, and the Gregory Institute. She was also the second librarian at the Carnegie Colored Library for a brief period. Her husband, J. Vance Lewis, was a prominent early Houston African-American attorney. The property was originally purchased in 1874 by Isabelle Simms, an African-American widow, who had been encouraged to buy property by her pastor, Reverend Jack Yates of Antioch Baptist Church. In 1896, Mrs. Simms conveyed the north portion of the site to Pauline Gray, who may have been a relative. Pauline Gray and her family were living on the property as early as 1897.

The Pauline Gray Lewis House is a contributing building located within the boundaries of the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District, 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. During this time period, more than 95% of Houston's first black businesses were located in the neighborhood. Almost 75% of Freedmen's Town's buildings have been demolished, yet the district remains extremely significant architecturally and historically. Since so few of the historic buildings remain, they are even more significant today, and represent a strong element of community sentiment and public pride. Since 1996, the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc., the house's current owner, has been an advocate for the preservation of the neighborhood’s remaining historic buildings and for education about the neighborhood’s unique history and culture. The museum intends to use the Pauline Gray Lewis House for archaeological research and classroom studios.

The Pauline Gray Lewis House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8, and is a contributing building to the Freedmen’s Town National Register Historic District - all considerations for Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Pauline Gray Lewis House at 1216 Wilson is a one-story wood frame cottage built in 1907. It sits next door to 'Van Court,' also known as the J. Vance Lewis House, which was the homestead of Pauline Gray Lewis and her husband, Joseph Vance Lewis. The J. Vance Lewis House was designated as a City of Houston Protected Landmark in 2007. The two houses are located in Freedmen's Town, an area on the southwest side of downtown Houston where emancipated slaves congregated after the Civil War. At one time, 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.

Before the two Lewis houses were built, the property - Lots 9 and 10, Block 23 in the Castanie Addition - was 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 as a domestic servant for several prominent employers, and Charles worked as a wood hauler. By the time Mrs. Simms purchased the property from H. H. and Frances F. Dooley in 1874, she was a widow. Her pastor, Reverend Jack Yates of Antioch Baptist Church, regularly encouraged his congregation to purchase property, so after earning enough money, Mrs. Simms gave the money to Reverend Yates to buy the land for her. The earliest mention of Isabelle Simms' Wilson Street residence comes from the 1879-1880 Houston City Directory. At that time, her address was given as "n(orth) s(ide) Andrews, west of Runnels." Reverend Jack Yates paid the annual property taxes for Isabelle, and when he died in 1897, the deed was returned to her.

In 1896, Isabelle conveyed the northeast portion of the property to Pauline Gray, who may have been a relative. Pauline Gray's family's home at 1216 Wilson was built a year later as evidenced by the 1897-1898 Houston City Directory listing for them.

Pauline Williams was born July 23, 1873 or 1874, in either Louisiana or Texas and moved to the Houston with her mother, Mary Williams Gray, and grandmother, Rosa Williams, in the late 1870s. All three are listed in the 1880 Federal Census for Harris County. At that time, they lived at the corner of Texas Avenue and Crawford Street with their employer, Alfred S. Richardson, who was Secretary for the Houston and Texas Central Railway. Mary Williams married John Gray sometime after 1890 and was widowed soon after.

Pauline Gray taught at the Second Ward Public School, the Green Pond School on West Dallas, and the Gregory Institute, and was the second librarian at the Carnegie Colored Library for a brief period. In 1902, Pauline Gray married J. Vance Lewis, a prominent local African-American attorney who had moved to Houston in 1901. The ceremony was held at Antioch Baptist Church and was officiated by Reverend F. L. Lights. J. Vance Lewis, who was born a slave on Christmas Day in 1863, was a native of Terrebonne 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 also attended law school in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Chicago, and was admitted to the Supreme Court of Illinois and the United States Supreme Court in 1897. 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 court judge on the Republican Black and Tan Party ticket.

According to a mechanic's lien dated August 26, 1907, the Lewises paid L. R. Jones \$2800 to construct improvements upon Lots 9 and 10 of Block 23, including their new residence 'Van Court' at 1218 Wilson. It is unclear whether the Williams' house at 1216 Wilson Street was constructed at this time or if an

existing structure was remodeled, given the fact that the Williams family had resided at 1216 Wilson Street as early as 1897. Isabelle Simms' house, which had formerly occupied the 1218 Wilson site, was torn down in the process, and she moved to the house at 1216 Wilson with Pauline's grandmother, Rosa Williams. Pauline's mother, Mary, moved in with her and J. Vance Lewis. The San Felipe streetcar ran parallel to Lewis property as it headed north on Wilson Street.

After Isabelle's death in 1915, the Lewis family used the home at 1216 Wilson as a rental property. After J. Vance Lewis died in 1925, Pauline Gray Lewis continued to live at 'Van Court.' She remarried twice, first to Leonce Lubin, also a teacher, and later to Samuel Byars, a welder by trade. Pauline Gray Lewis died on December 26, 1963, and was interred at Olivewood Cemetery.

After Pauline's death, her homestead was bequeathed to Johnnie Route, a close friend she had considered as a son. In 1966, Route sold the home to Joseph M. Phillipone, who used it as a rental property. In 1969, Lee and Esther Jackson moved into the home and lived there for many years. The property was purchased by the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc., in 2007.

Almost 75% of the Freedmen's Town Historic District's buildings have been demolished, yet the district remains extremely significant not just architecturally and historically, but also for its association with freed slaves who moved there to live, work and open businesses of their own. Since so few of the historic buildings remain, they are even more significant today. Moreover, these buildings represent a strong element of community sentiment and public pride. Since 1996, the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc. has been an advocate for the preservation of the neighborhood's remaining historic buildings and for education about the neighborhood's history and culture.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:

The Pauline Gray Lewis House was listed as a contributing property of high significance in the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District designated in 1985. The house is a one-story, wood frame cottage built on a raised masonry pier foundation. The house is a "T" plan cottage with an intersecting gable roof with enclosed eaves and cornice returns. The roofline of the front gable, facing Wilson Street, runs perpendicular to and intersects the main roof ridge, which is parallel to the street. This continuation of this intersecting roof ridge forms the roof of a rear facing gable extension, thus creating the "T" shape of the house. The rear "ell" extension of the house features a shed roof porch which faces south towards the side yard. The shed roof porch has been enclosed and now serves as additional living space and was probably the result of the addition of running water to the home after its initial construction. The exterior is clad in horizontal lap beveled wood siding with wood corner boards. Windows used throughout the house are of a 1/1 lite, double hung, wood sash type.

The front façade features a shed roof porch which covers the main entry door and a single double hung window located to the left of the door. The square, front facing gable extends beyond the front door to the right side and also features a single, 1/1 lite, double hung, wood sash window. The north or side elevation of the home presents the longest exterior wall of the house, which is punctuated by two, evenly spaced, double hung, 1/1 lite, wood sash windows. The south elevation of the house represents the narrow end of the "T" shaped floor plan which also features a single, 1/1 lite, double hung, wood sash window. The west or rear elevation of the house is characterized by a rear facing bay which is the continuation of the bay located on the front façade. The west elevation also features a single, 1/1 lite, double hung, wood sash window which is slightly smaller than those used on the other elevations. The west facing rear entry door, which is of a divided lite over wood panel configuration, is located in the now enclosed back porch.

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Comparisons of the building's footprint on the 1907, 1924, and 1951 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps suggest that the building has retained a high degree of architectural integrity. The Pauline Gray Lewis House will become part of the "Green Classroom" of the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc. Prairie View A&M architecture students have completed the initial discovery phase at 1216 and 1218 Wilson, and a studio will be housed on site beginning in Spring 2008. The museum also intends to use the property to conduct archaeological research into the material culture of early Houston, and of the African-American community in particular.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Harris County Deed Records.

Harris County Health Department, Death Certificate Records.

Houston City Directories, 1870-2006.

United States Census 1870, 1880, 1890, and 1900, Harris County, Texas.

Sanborn Maps, 1896, 1907, 1924-1951.

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:

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 (Sec. 33-224(a)(1);
- (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);
- (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);
- (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);
- (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)).

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)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Pauline Gray Lewis House at 1216 Wilson Street.

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SITE LOCATION MAP
PAULINE GRAY LEWIS HOUSE
1216 WILSON STREET
NOT TO SCALE

