

## PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** R. E. Avery House  
**OWNERS:** Alfred and Vicky Bettis  
**APPLICANTS:** Alfred and Vicky Bettis  
**LOCATION:** 504 Woodland Street – Woodland Heights  
**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** N/A

**AGENDA ITEM:** VI.a  
**HPO FILE No.:** 08PL56  
**DATE ACCEPTED:** Feb-18-08  
**HAHC HEARING:** Apr-17-08  
**PC HEARING:** Apr-24-08

### SITE INFORMATION:

Lot 2, Block 22, Woodland Heights, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-and-one-half-story residence.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The R. E. Avery House, located at 504 Woodland Street in the Woodland Heights neighborhood, was built between 1910 and 1911 by the William A. Wilson Company, and is an example of the American Foursquare architectural style. Wilson was a leading developer of early twentieth century Houston, who planned and developed both the Woodland Heights and Eastwood subdivisions. The R. E. Avery House exemplifies a house type that is both historically and architecturally significant in Houston and reflects the culture and social standing of the people who settled in the new 'streetcar suburbs' north of downtown Houston in the early twentieth century. The R. E. Avery House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, and 5 for Landmark and Protected Landmark designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The R. E. Avery House at 504 Woodland Street was built in 1910-1911 by the William A. Wilson Company. William A. Wilson (1864-1928) was one of Houston's leading developers during the early twentieth century. Wilson, originally from Syracuse, New York, visited Houston in 1892, and was impressed by the new Houston Heights development. Convinced that the City of Houston would grow and prosper, he moved to Houston in 1893 at the age of 28, and lived with his wife and young children in a Houston rooming house until 1902. He founded the William A. Wilson Realty Company in 1898 and was an active participant in the Heights development, building and selling a number of homes in the Heights as well as other areas around Houston. The Wilson family moved to a home at 921 Heights in 1902. In 1910, Wilson built a new home for his family at 205 Bayland in his new Woodland Heights subdivision, where he lived until his death in 1928 at the age of 63. His widow remained in the home until 1938.

Wilson began the development of Woodland Heights in 1907 with the purchase of 106 acres located less than two miles northwest of downtown Houston on Houston Avenue. The land was once part of John Austin's Mexican land grant. Wilson began clearing the land, laying out 600 lots and planting numerous oak trees along Bayland Avenue. Within months, several streets were laid out and about a dozen houses had been built by the official public opening of "The Woodland Heights" on Tuesday, October 15, 1907. Woodland Heights was one of Houston's 'streetcar suburbs' – made possible by the development of new electric streetcar lines that provided transportation to workers. The Houston Avenue streetcar line stopped at Bayland Avenue, the gated entrance to the community.

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In 1900, Houston's population was 44,633. With the discovery of Spindletop in 1901 and the building of the Houston Ship Channel, Houston experienced a period of economic expansion and population growth. Wilson carefully planned his new, residential community to target the expanding middle class population. Wilson installed a complete water system throughout the entire subdivision, a significant amenity at a time when many Houston houses still depended on cisterns for drinking water. The William A. Wilson Company publication 'Woodland Heights' describes other amenities unusual at that time for moderate income families: "miles of the finest cement sidewalks laid, cement curbing and street crossings placed along that principal avenues, and hundreds of young live oaks and sycamores planted in regular rows on either side of the streets." The community also had electricity for lighting homes and street corners. Wilson drew up extensive deed restrictions prohibiting all commercial institutions, including saloons and livery stables, to protect the residential character of the neighborhood.

The styles of homes built in Woodland Heights included bungalows, late Victorian cottages, and two-story American Foursquares. To promote his new development, Wilson published a home and garden magazine in which he depicted photos and floor plans of homes with elaborate descriptions of the amenities of the neighborhood. In one publication he boasted that "Woodland Heights is less than two miles from the heart of the business district" and that "the Woodland Heights [street]car line, named for the addition, runs straight out Houston Avenue, and provides ample and convenient transportation facilities."

Wilson went on to develop Eastwood in 1911, another planned neighborhood of approximately 1000 lots in Houston's East End. As one of Houston's first and most dedicated tree-planting enthusiasts, Wilson was chosen to serve on the City of Houston's first Board of Park Commissioners in 1910 and helped to establish Hermann Park.

R. E. Avery and his wife Lou R. Avery purchased the newly-built house at 504 Woodland Street on June 15, 1911 for \$5000. Mr. Avery was a cashier with William D. Cleveland & Sons. The William A. Wilson Company was a pioneer in offering homes purchased on the "Easy Payment Plan," and Mr. Avery financed the \$5,000 note with a \$369.45 down payment financing the remaining amount over 120 months at 8% interest. His payments were \$54.15 per month. The Averys lived in the house for seven years before selling it on September 16, 1918 for \$3800. The house went through a quick succession of owners before being purchased by Roy and Julia Simmons for \$3,000 in 1937. The Great Depression affected real estate values in Houston just as in other parts of the country, and Roy and Julia Simmons purchased the house for less than the original purchase price. The Simmons financed the house at ten percent interest, and lived in the house for the next 43 years until it was sold in 1980.

Julia Simmons, the longest resident of the house, played the pipe organ at the Woodland Baptist Church, which was turned into loft apartments around 2006. Julia also gave piano lessons to many Woodland Heights children who often sat on the entryway bench awaiting their lessons. Roy and Julia had one child, a son named Roy Simmons, Jr., who was sixteen when his parents bought the house at 504 Woodland Street. Roy Jr. graduated from Reagan High School with the class of 1940. His bedroom was the second floor northeast bedroom, and the northwest bedroom was often rented out to church members.

Roy revisited the home in October 2007 and provided the following historical information:

*The home had just been converted from gas to electric prior to the Simmons purchase. The home had two circuits; one controlled the attic fan and the second controlled the electrical outlets and switches. The lack of sufficient circuits caused the breakers to trip when Mrs. Simmons used the family toaster. Julia would call upstairs telling family members to turn off the lights so she could make toast. (Although the attic fan is long gone, the control switch was preserved and can still be seen on the second floor landing.)*

*The walls were covered with wallpaper over canvas. (Samples of wallpaper were preserved during the recent remodel.) Sheetrock was added during the Simmons ownership. The Simmons also removed all interior woodwork and stripped off the heavy dark lacquer finish, then painted the trim with white enamel which remains to date. Columns were located on either side of the opening to the living room.*

*After graduation, Roy Simmons Jr. joined the Marines. He married Helen Cobb at 7 am on October 2, 1943 in the living room of 504 Woodland St. By 9 am that same day, Roy and his new bride were on their way to San Francisco where Roy was scheduled to be shipped out to Japan twelve days later.*

*Roy Jr. sold the home shortly before his mother's death for a little over \$70,000. Julia, who was preceded in death by her husband on May 17, 1984, passed away December 24, 1986. She remains the longest resident of 504 Woodland.*

Current owners, Al and Vicky Bettis, bought the house in 2002, and completed a restoration/remodel in 2006. Architects Rogers+LaBarthe and builder/remodeler Don Broman supported the Bettis' goal of maintaining originality and historical integrity.

## **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:**

The Avery House is an American Foursquare, a style built mainly between 1895 and 1930. The square-type homes typically had two full stories and an attic often made livable by large dormers. Economy suggested the cube shape, which yielded the most interior space for money spent on land, foundation, framing, and roof. Foursquares were also identifiable by their wide porches and large grouped windows. In general, the homes were more practical in nature and did not feature the art glass, bays, and ornamental clad roofs seen in earlier Victorian homes. The name "Foursquare" came from the fact that the houses typically had four rooms on each floor. The Avery House originally had a foyer, living room, dining room and kitchen on the first floor and three bedrooms and one bath on the second.

During the remodel, the current owners kept most of the home's interior and exterior intact, choosing to expand the home in the back by adding fifteen feet to all three floors and refinishing the attic.

The Avery House's exterior remains primarily as it was originally built. The exterior siding is the original tear drop cypress, horizontal cladding. The oversized Colonial Revival 20-light windows in the foyer, living room, and dining rooms are original and are indicative of many of Wilson's designs. The "wavy" glass in the windows is typical of the time. During the 2006 remodel, it was discovered that the original house color was the traditional white.

Throughout the house, all original ball hinges, door knobs and window pulls were restored and reused in the 2006 remodel. All existing cypress doors were stripped of their many layers of paint and stained, and original light fixture were maintained. Many of the original features of the house were retained, including a built-in pine bench in the house's foyer. Its purpose may have been a "suitor's bench" where young gentlemen would wait for the homeowner's daughters as they prepared for their dates. During the Simmons residency, music students would sit on the bench waiting their turn for piano lessons.

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The red pine floors are also original and were restored in the remodel. Additional pine from the 1910 era was obtained and used in the new additions to the house. A split staircase leading up to the second floor is typical of many William Wilson homes. The newel posts and balustrades are original and, in keeping with the lines of the house, square.

A local arborist estimated the live oak tree in the backyard to be approximately 400 years old. The tree is registered with The Harris County Tree Registry published by The Park People. The tree measures 156” in circumference, is 63 feet high, and has a canopy of 99 feet.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Harris County Contract Records.

Harris County Deed Records.

Fox, Stephen, <http://community.rice.edu/focusresources/reference/fox.html>

<http://nearthwesthouston.com/Article46.htm>

Interview with Roy Simmons, Jr.

*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 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);

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- (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);
- (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 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 R. E. Avery House at 504 Woodland Street.

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SITE LOCATION MAP  
R. E. AVERY HOUSE  
504 WOODLAND STREET  
NOT TO SCALE

