

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Lamberth-Abercrombie House
OWNERS: Thomas L. and Eugenia Carter
APPLICANTS: Thomas L. and Eugenia Carter
LOCATION: 2221 River Oaks Boulevard – River Oaks
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: VII.d
HPO FILE NO: 08PL73
DATE ACCEPTED: Oct-23-08
HAHC HEARING: Nov-13-08
PC HEARING: Nov-20-08

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 1, Block 21, River Oaks Section 4, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The building on the site includes a historic two-story residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Southern Colonial-style residence at 2221 River Oaks Boulevard was designed in 1928 by Cameron Fairchild, a prominent Houston architect, for Clarence O. Lamberth. The home was one of the first built on River Oaks Boulevard, and the Lamberth family was one of the pioneer families of River Oaks. The home was also owned for many years by James S. Abercrombie, an oilman, civic leader, and philanthropist, who was the lead benefactor to the construction of Texas Children's Hospital. The Lamberth-Abercrombie House meets Criteria 3, 4, 5, and 6 for Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

River Oaks

When Will C. Hogg, Mike Hogg, and Hugh Potter began the development of River Oaks in 1923, it was with the intention of making it into a demonstration of the highest standards of modern community planning, a role model for the rest of Houston to follow. Will Hogg's ambitiousness and Hugh Potter's skillful management of River Oaks during its first thirty years made the community known nation-wide as a symbol of Houston. Encouraging home-owners to retain the most talented architects in Houston (as well as several architects of national reputation) to design new houses, they succeeded in creating a large, professionally-administered residential community that demonstrated the potential for beauty in a raw and often raucous city. During the 1920s and 1930s, River Oaks was constantly published in national news, real estate, and design media, highlighting its planning standards, its residential architecture, and its landscape design. Since the 1970s, River Oaks has also been the focus of scholarly analysis, in recognition of its significant contributions to the history of Houston and twentieth-century American elite suburban community development.

The creation of this type of subdivision was unique for Houston in many respects. The subdivision was laid out at what was then the far western edge of Houston. Prior to 1923, the majority of Houston's residential developments had occurred in a tight girdle around the downtown business district. As the sheer size of Houston increased, the demand for more neighborhoods grew along with it. Beginning in the early 20th century, the development followed a generally westerly and southwesterly expansion. The newer, more fashionable neighborhoods, such as Westmoreland (1902), Avondale (1907), Montrose

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(1911), Audubon Place (1906), Cherryhurst (1908), Binz, Southmore (1914), and Courtland Place (1906), developed along the Main Street corridor and to the southwest of downtown. River Oaks, however, was situated at the western city limits far away from other developments.

In addition, the developers broke with convention by laying out an organic pattern of roadways which lent a sense of spaciousness to the neighborhood, which was very different from the traditional Houston neighborhoods that followed a more rigid approach to development. These traditional neighborhoods used street grids which carved the land up into predictable square or rectangular blocks. According to the Texas State History Association's Handbook of Texas:

“River Oaks is 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. A "gentleman's agreement" excluded blacks, Jews, and other minorities. The first home in the area, built by Will and Sue Clayton, is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Among the other notable houses is Ima Hogg's family home Bayou Bend [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 1990s River Oaks was at the geographic center of Houston. The community operated independently for three years, after which it was annexed by the city of Houston.”

The creation and implementation of the River Oaks plan went far beyond the layout of the neighborhood itself. The developers also needed to devise a clever way of drawing prospective buyers away from the more traditional neighborhoods located closer to the downtown business district. This was achieved in two ways. The first was to insure that proper roads connected River Oaks with downtown Houston. The second was to bring the amenities to the residents.

Beginning in 1925, work began in earnest on Buffalo Bayou Drive, which would later become Allen Parkway. Buffalo Bayou Drive was designed by the Kansas City architectural landscape firm of Hare and Hare. The thoroughfare, atypical for its time, was built to provide a reliable route by which River Oaks residents could get to their jobs in downtown Houston while simultaneously providing a pleasant driving experience. The street was designed to follow the meanders of nearby Buffalo Bayou and originated at the north entry to the River Oaks neighborhood. The entry was marked by grand entry gates designed by Houston architect John F. Staub in 1926.

The plan for the scenic drive began more than a decade before its implementation with the Arthur Comey Plan for Houston in 1912. The Comey Plan was a progressive and ambitious plan to guide the

future of Houston's development, with quality of life issues as a major component. Parts of the Comey plan called for the creation of scenic drives, considerable park space, and linear parks along the city's bayous. Ultimately, only a small proportion of the components of Comey's plan came to fruition. Among these realized elements were the layout of South Main at Hermann Park with its prominent traffic circles, and Allen Parkway Drive with its adjacent linear park space situated between the drive and Buffalo Bayou.

Owners and Residents

Notable Houston architect, Cameron Fairchild, designed the home at 2221 River Oaks Boulevard for Clarence O. Lamberth. C. O. Lamberth was born in Many, Louisiana. He spent his entire career at Anderson Clayton & Co. where he began his career as a clerk. At the time of the construction of his home, he had been promoted to cotton buyer and his offices were located on the 11th floor of the Cotton Exchange Building. On March 25, 1928, the *Houston Post* ran the following:

“Lamberth will build \$50,000 River Oaks Home – Cameron D. Fairchild, local architect, has completed plans for the construction of a beautiful home in River Oaks for C.O. Lamberth, buyer for Anderson Clayton & Co., at an estimated cost of \$50,000, it was learned Saturday... The home will be one of the most elaborate in River Oaks and will be situated on an unusually large site.”

A 1941 issue of *River Oaks Magazine* describes the Lamberth family as “one of the pioneer families of River Oaks, of which the community is justly proud.” Interestingly, the Lamberths were in some ways “pioneers” on River Oaks Boulevard. The 1928 City Directory shows only two other homes – #1708 occupied by J.H. Foster and #2220 as completed but vacant. Lamberth would stay in the home only eight years, and around 1936, the home was sold to James Smither Abercrombie.

Jim S. Abercrombie was born in Huntsville, Texas, on July 7, 1891, the fourth of thirteen children of James Buford and Evelina Wood Abercrombie, Jr. In 1909, Jim's cousin, Charles Abercrombie, hired him to work as an unskilled deckhand on a drilling rig for the Goose Creek Production Company. By 1910, Jim had become a driller for Goose Creek. When he was in his early twenties, Crown Petroleum hired him as the field superintendent for some of its wells, and while working for Crown he was the first to use salt water to put out a derrick fire, a discovery he made because there was no fresh water available. In 1918, he used his savings and a loan to buy a used drilling rig to drill on his own in the Burkburnett oilfield, north of Wichita Falls. At the same time, he continued as a superintendent at Crown. He had several wells at Burkburnett by 1920, and soon left Crown Petroleum to work on his own in South Texas and in the Gulf Coast oilfields. He helped his brother, Bolling, finance the Houston Carbonate Company, which sold carbonic gas to soda fountains, creameries, and bottlers. On July 9, 1920, he bought, with Harry Cameron, the Cameron-Davant Company, a business that sold oil-drilling supplies and parts for rigs and wells. Jim Abercrombie became the unsalaried president of Cameron Iron Works, and before his thirtieth birthday he was the president of the expanding James S. Abercrombie Company, an independent drilling operation with five rigs.

In late 1921, the Monarch Oil and Refining Company gave Cameron Iron Works a contract to find a way to control the increasing gas pressure in deep wells. But through Abercrombie's persistence, he and Harry Cameron developed the Type MO blowout preventer, which, after additional refinements by Cameron, led to a patent for its solution to the high gas pressure. The company grew increasingly

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successful as additional patented inventions, such as a casing-cutter and various joints and clamps, followed.

Between 1924 and 1929, Abercrombie traveled internationally to solve oilfield problems. In 1929, with Dan Harrison, he formed Harrison and Abercrombie, which invested and drilled in many oilfields in Texas and Louisiana, especially the Old Ocean field in Brazoria County. In 1939, Cameron Iron Works developed a list of wartime products that it could produce for the United States military to use in World War II. The military eventually moved Cameron Iron Works up from subcontractor status to direct supplier. By 1941 the company had a contract to build K-guns and arbor bombs; this led to a 1942 contract to build .50-caliber gun barrels. Improved techniques developed by Cameron engineers drastically cut production time for rifling and machining the barrels. Cameron Iron Works also built the Tiny Tim rockets that were used in beach invasions by the navy. In 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Harrison and Abercrombie to build an aviation gas refinery at the Old Ocean oilfield; the refinery was completed by 1943. Around this time Harrison sold his share in Harrison and Abercrombie to the Magnolia Petroleum Company, which had Abercrombie administer its newly purchased share. Abercrombie sold the James S. Abercrombie Company and his part of Old Ocean to Stanolind of Indiana for \$54 million on May 23, 1946. By November of that year, however, he had formed J. S. Abercrombie Interests, Incorporated.

Also in 1946, Abercrombie bought a ranch on the Guadalupe River just a few miles east of Gonzales, Texas. Its fertile lowlands were a perfect place to invest money in agriculture and animal husbandry. This ranching operation built a feed factory for ranch animals. In 1959, Abercrombie Interests was reorganized into the J. S. Abercrombie Mineral Company, which drilled wells in Texas, Louisiana, and the neutral zone between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Also, Cameron Iron Works continued to prosper, and by 1960 had some 2,000 employees and sales topping \$40 million.

On March 10, 1950, Abercrombie and several other prominent Houston citizens chartered the Texas Children's Hospital in Houston to treat sick and critically ill children. Abercrombie, the first to donate money to this project, gave \$1 million of the \$2.5 million donated to cover construction costs. He requested that absolutely no restrictions be made on which sick children could be admitted. He also donated all proceeds from the Pin Oak Horse Show to the hospital. Then in 1968 the James S. Abercrombie Foundation was established as a trust to hold gifts and grants primarily for the Texas Children's Hospital and for the Texas Heart Institute of St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital. While living in Houston, Abercrombie joined many clubs and organizations, among them the Masons, the Old Colony Club, the Houston Yacht Club, the River Oaks Country Club, and the Houston Club. He died in Houston on January 7, 1975, and was buried at Glenwood Cemetery there.

James Abercrombie owned the home until his death in 1975. His wife Lillie continued to own the home until around 1977. After the Abercrombies, the home changed hands several times with owners including Earl P. Burke, Jr. (1978), Michael and Nina Zilkha (1987), Judith and Artoun Ramian (1990), Robert I. Lewy (1994). In 1996, the Carter family purchased the home and has lived there since.

2221 River Oaks Boulevard

The residence at 2221 River Oaks Boulevard was built by Cameron Fairchild in 1928. 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 2221 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 1929) 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 2221 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. (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 August 20, 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.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Cameron Fairchild home located at 2221 River Oaks Boulevard may be described as Southern Colonial in style. The 1929 "River Oaks A Pictorial Presentation of Houston's Residential Park" described the home: “This old-fashioned Louisiana Colonial, with its white columned portico, sets far back on River Oaks Boulevard in a grove of ancient trees.” The caption is accompanied by a close-up of the impressive entry way of the home, which looks almost exactly as it appears today. The door boasts an elegant fanlight and is encased in intricate woodworking. Of note is the intricate dentil molding and the small wooden balconette just above the door. The photo also shows the home as red brick, today it is painted white. The home is perfectly symmetrical in organization with 6 columns encasing a lovely front porch.

As mentioned above, the Carter family purchased the home in 1996. At that time, they undertook a major restoration of the home using the original linen plans drawn by Cameron Fairchild. Their intent was to reverse the alterations made by the string of previous owners. In the restoration, they removed a circular drive and parking court, returned a glass porch to its original screen and generally tried to bring back the home to Cameron Fairchild’s original plan. They hired architects, Curtis & Windham, to complete the restoration and to build a pool house/garage. The pool house/garage project received notice in Southern Accents in July 2003 with the article “Pool House Precision” that described the architecture of the out-building as a “smaller, gem-like project.” Interestingly, they used Jane Curtis, Bill Curtis’ wife, to design the gardens of the home.

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

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- 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 Lamberth-Abercrombie House at 2221 River Oaks Boulevard.

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LAMBERTH-ABERCROMBIE HOUSE
2221 RIVER OAKS BOULEVARD



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SITE LOCATION MAP
LAMBERTH-ABERCROMBIE HOUSE
2221 RIVER OAKS BOULEVARD
NOT TO SCALE

