

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House

OWNERS: Jenny Chang and Wei T. Yang

APPLICANTS: Same

LOCATION: 2184 Troon Road

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: II

HPO FILE NO: 10L227

DATE ACCEPTED: Feb-25-10

HAHC HEARING: May-20-10

PC HEARING: May-27-2010

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 19, Block 53, River Oaks Section 3, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, wood framed, brick veneer, single family residence, and detached garage.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House at 2184 Troon Road in River Oaks is an excellent example of the Colonial Revival style. The house was built circa 1938 by contractor Ivan Greer for Dean and Rosa E. Strickland. The house's most prominent resident was Lera Millard Thomas, who was the first woman from Texas elected to the U.S. Congress. Mrs. Thomas was the widow of Albert Thomas, who was the U. S. Representative from the Eighth District of Texas, which included all of Harris County, from 1936 until his death in 1966. After he died in office, Lera Thomas was elected in the special election to serve out the remainder of his term. Mrs. Thomas was also a consultant for the U.S. State Department Agency for International Development, a member of the Houston League of Women Voters, and creator of Millard's Crossing Historic Village, which preserves some of Nacogdoches County's most important historic structures. Ann and Edward Lasater, the second owners of the home, were the daughter and son-in-law of Albert and Lera Thomas.

The Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House meets Criteria 1, 3, and 4 for Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Ownership History

The home at 2184 Troon Road was built by contractor Ivan Greer circa 1938 for Dean and Rosa E. Strickland. The original plans show that the home was built for the Stricklands; however, no architect is mentioned on the plans. Dean Strickland was employed as a sales manager for Houston Gas and Fuel, a division of United Gas Corporation, where he remained with the company until his death in 1953. After Dean Strickland's death, his widow Rosa remained in the home until 1963 when it was sold to Edward A. and Ann Lasater, the daughter and son-in-law of Albert and Lera Thomas. Edward and Ann Lasater lived in the home until 1967, after which time the City Directory lists Lera Thomas, the widow of Congressman Albert Thomas, as occupying the home. Lera Thomas lived in the home until 1968 when she returned to her hometown of Nacogdoches. At this time, the house passed back to Ann and Edward Lasater who remained there until 1992.

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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 (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

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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.

Lera Thomas

Lera Thomas was born Lera Millard on August 3, 1900 in Nacogdoches, Texas. She graduated from Nacogdoches High School and attended Brenau College in Gainesville, Georgia, for two years and then attended the University of Alabama. In 1922, during the middle of her senior year at the University of Alabama, she left college to marry Albert Thomas. Lera and Albert had three children, firstborn Jim Nelson Thomas (who died in childhood in 1934), Ann Thomas Lasater and Lera Thomas. Lera was employed at a bank while husband Albert attended the University of Texas Law School.

Lera Thomas was the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress from the State of Texas. She was elected as a Democrat to the Eighty-ninth Congress to fill the vacancy caused by the death of her husband, Albert Thomas. (Later, Barbara Jordan became the first Texas woman elected to Congress in her own right). She served as congresswoman from March 26, 1966 until January 3, 1967. She was not a candidate for reelection.

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Women have historically been outsiders in politics, legally barred from voting until the twentieth century and subsequently handicapped in running for office by lack of campaign funds and exclusion from the inner sancta of political parties. As outsiders, women have often become involved in politics to promote causes, especially those relating to family and community welfare, rather than to build careers. Although the female politician did not emerge until the twentieth century, a long political tradition of advocacy and activism predated women's admission to formal electoral politics. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries middle-class women used their voluntary associations to voice opinions on public policy and seek legislative remedies for social problems. In the process they pioneered pressure-group politics: promoting an issue before the public, mounting petition and letter-writing campaigns to state legislators, urging male voters not to reelect uncooperative incumbents.

Lera traveled to Vietnam in December of 1966 to January 1967 as an accredited representative of the Houston Chronicle. Her words were broadcast on the Times Square Caterpillar sign. Lera also served as a consultant for the U.S. State Department Agency for International Development (AID) where she helped select civilians to work in Vietnam.

In 1968, Lera returned to Nacogdoches and established Millard's Crossing Historic Village with the goal of saving some of Nacogdoches County's most important historic structures. Millard's Crossing also became a place to house her extensive antique collection. The mission of Millard's Crossing Historic Village is to preserve and maintain the historic 19th century buildings which have been moved from various sites in Nacogdoches County and to educate visitors about the history of East Texas settlement. Millard's Crossing Historic Village has become an important tourist attraction and was even voted Best Attraction/Museum Guide by the Texas Travel Industry Association in 2002.

Lera died in Nacogdoches on July 23, 1993. Upon her death, an article appeared in the *Chronicle* with the headline, "Lera Thomas, Texas' first woman in Congress, dies." The article described her later work as a consultant for the U.S. State Department Agency for International Development, her membership in the Houston League of Women Voters, and her work with Millard's Crossing. In the article, Lera was recognized for her many contributions to Texas. Lera is buried in Oak Grove Cemetery in Nacogdoches.

Albert Thomas

Lera Thomas's husband was the legislator Albert Thomas. Albert was born in Nacogdoches, Texas, on April 12, 1898 to James and Lonnie (Langston) Thomas. He attended public schools in Nacogdoches and worked in his father's store. During World War I he served as a second lieutenant in the army. He graduated from Rice University in 1920 and from the University of Texas at Austin law school in 1926. After admittance to the bar in 1927, he returned to Nacogdoches to practice law. In 1927, Albert won election as county attorney of Nacogdoches County and served this post until 1930.

In 1930, Albert moved to Houston to become Assistant United States District Attorney for the Southern District of Texas. He held that position until 1936. Beginning January 3, 1937 he represented the Eighth District in the United States House of Representatives. At the time, the Eighth District comprised all of Harris County, including the city of Houston. He held that position until his death in 1966; he served the people of Harris County for 29 years.

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While serving in the House Representatives, Thomas was a member of numerous committees including, Irrigation and Reclamations, Pensions, Labor, Elections, Appropriations, the Independent Offices Subcommittee, Defense Subcommittee on Appropriations, and the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. Albert dedicated approximately five years to the successful placement of NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center (later the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center) in Houston. In 1949, he became chairman of the House Subcommittee on Independent Office Appropriations. He was elected chairman of the Texas House delegation in 1950, and, in 1964, was named chairman of the House Democratic caucus. At the time of his death in 1966, Thomas had risen to eleventh in seniority in the House of Representatives.

In 1963, Albert began contemplating retiring from office because of failing health. President John F. Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson traveled to Houston to attend a testimonial dinner on November 21, 1963, in Thomas's honor to urge that he remain in Congress. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas the following day. Lera Thomas sat with President Kennedy at the testimonial dinner described above on the night before he was assassinated. Albert Thomas was in the motorcade when Kennedy was assassinated. According to an oral history with Mrs. Thomas, Albert Thomas suggested that the swearing in be conducted before flying back to Washington. Thomas returned to Washington on the President's plane and witnessed the swearing in of President Johnson on Air Force One. The photograph in which he appears as a witness to Johnson's oath of office is one of the most memorable pictures from that historic time.

According to Lera's oral history, Albert was instrumental in the deepening and widening of the ship channels; the Houston post office construction; acquiring appropriations for the Houston federal building; the Federal Aid to Airport Act; and the development of San Felipe Courts (Listed in the National Register of Historic Places). As a result of these achievements, the downtown Convention and Exhibition Center, located in the hub of the Theater District and Buffalo Bayou redevelopment, was named in his honor. The original configuration of the Albert Thomas Convention and Exhibition Center had 127,500 square feet of exhibition space, 40,000 square feet of meeting rooms and parking for 2,000 cars. It served as a complete, flexible meeting place for the nation's business leaders, as well as a showplace for the products of various industries. It was also the home of the National Space Hall of Fame. With the assistance of Central Houston, the City of Houston redeveloped the Albert Thomas Convention Center to accommodate a 155,000 square foot retail and entertainment center. The Albert Thomas Convention and Exhibition Center reopened as Bayou Place on New Year's Eve, 1997 featuring a sports bar, a country and western dance hall, a beach club, restaurants, and dance clubs.

Albert died in Washington D.C. on February 15, 1966 and is buried in Houston National Cemetery.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House is an excellent example of the Colonial Revival, a style popular in the United States between 1890 and 1935. The Colonial Revival style resulted from a rejection of the Queen Anne Revival style, and a desire to return to a more "traditional" American building type. The style took on added popularity with the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1920s. This style draws from the simple building forms typical of early American colonial structures, and elements of classical or Georgian architecture. It is closely related to the Neoclassical Revival and Georgian Revival styles. Colonial Revival residential

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structures are typically one or two stories, with hipped or gabled roofs and symmetrical facades. The entryway or porch is the primary focus, often highlighted with a decorative crown or pediment.

The Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House at 2184 Troon Road was built circa 1938. Its most prominent Colonial Revival details include symmetrical façade; symmetrically balanced rectangular windows with 6/6 glass lights, flanked by shutters; hipped roof; and an accentuated front door. The house is of wood frame construction with brick veneer on all facades and features an asymmetrical plan. The house features a hipped, normally sloped roof with slight eave overhang and boxed eaves. The front entrance is centered on the south elevation. The front door is wood paneled and is flanked by original sidelights and capped by a fan light. On the front elevation are two segmental dormers featuring double hung windows with 6/6 glass lights. The first floor of the front elevation features two bay windows capped with copper clad roofs. The second floor of the front elevation features rectangular, double hung windows with 6/6 glass lights. The windows are flanked by louvered shutters. A brick chimney is prominently featured on the east eave wall. The portico over the entry door was a later addition, which is reversible.

The current owners are preparing to renovate the house. The renovation will not change the façade of the home and the plans include:

- updating all bathrooms;
- updating the kitchen;
- connecting the house to the garage by way of an enclosed solarium;
- adding a new master bath and closet space above the existing den;
- adding an en suite bathroom to the back bedroom.

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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APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the 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 | D - does not satisfy | NA - not applicable |
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- (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.

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 Designation of the Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House at 2184 Troon Road.

HAHC and PLANNING COMMISSION ACTION

Recommended to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Strickland-Lasater-Thomas House at 2184 Troon Road.

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EXHIBIT A
STRICKLAND-LASATER-THOMAS HOUSE
2184 TROON ROAD



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EXHIBIT B
SITE LOCATION MAP
STRICKLAND-LASATER-THOMAS HOUSE
2184 TROON ROAD
NOT TO SCALE

