

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Butler Brothers Building –  
Houston Permitting Center

**OWNER:** City of Houston

**APPLICANTS:** Same

**LOCATION:** 1002-1008 Washington Avenue

**AGENDA ITEM:** III.b

**HPO FILE NO:** 12PL113

**DATE ACCEPTED:** 06-7-2012

**HAHC HEARING:** 12-06-2012

**SITE INFORMATION:** Reserve A, Block 1, City of Houston Permitting Center, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic four-story brick and concrete warehouse built in 1919. It is sited facing south on the corner of Washington Avenue and Elder Street. The north side of the site abuts the Southern Pacific railroad tracks.

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

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Butler Brothers Building was constructed in 1919 by Henry F. Jonas and Tabor for the Butler Brothers firm, a wholesale general merchandise company based in Chicago. Butler Brothers supplied retail goods to mid-size and smaller retailers. The company had warehouses all over the country; several were built during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The firm did not stay long in Houston, as the building was reoccupied in 1924 by the Universal Terminal Warehouse Company. The building was originally two stories tall plus a basement. Two additional stories were added by 1940.

The building remained under Universal Terminal Warehouse Company's management into the 1980s. By 1996, it was vacant. The City of Houston purchased the building in 2009 and undertook a LEED certified renovation of the building with the purpose of turning it into the City Permitting Center. This project was completed in 2011. The City of Houston won the Good Brick Award for the restoration of the Butler Brothers Building in 2012 from Preservation Houston.

The Butler Brothers Building is significant for its architecture and for its architectural type, as well as being tied to the history of commerce and transportation of Houston. The Butler Brothers Building meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, and 5 for Protected Landmark designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Butler Brothers operated an office in Houston at 107½ Main Street in 1919. In November 1919, *Houston*, the Houston Magazine Publishing Company's magazine for the Young Men's Business League, reported:

“‘Merchandise distributors’ says Butler Bros was building a fireproof warehouse on Washington at Tenth. 150 feet on Washington, which was the front entrance, and 250 ft. on Tenth (this was the entire block of Tenth). The building had two stories and a basement plus a foundation that could support five more floors.”

The Butler Brothers company was a merchandise distribution company that supplied goods to medium sized retailers. The online *Encyclopedia of Chicago* explains further:

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“George and Edward Butler founded a wholesale mail-order company in Boston in 1877. Butler Bros. opened a Chicago warehouse in 1879, and the city became home to the company's catalog department. (All of its operations were based in Chicago after 1930, when the purchasing department moved from New York.) By 1910, the Chicago offices employed about 1,000 people. Like Sears and Montgomery Ward, other Chicago companies that had large mail-order operations, Butler Bros. moved into brick-and-mortar retailing during the 1920s. By the beginning of the 1930s, it operated over 100 of its own “Scott” and “L. C. Burr” stores; at the same time, it had begun a franchising business that allowed independent retailers to become members of the “Ben Franklin” and “Federated” chains, which were supplied by Butler Bros. By 1936, there were about 2,600 Ben Franklin stores and 1,400 Federated stores around the country, mostly in small towns. During the 1940s and 1950s, Butler Bros. approached \$120 million a year in wholesale and retail sales, ranking it among the leading wholesalers in the United States. In 1960, after it sold Ben Franklin and its other retail operations to the City Products Corp. of Ohio (which was bought in 1965 by the Household Finance Corp. of Chicago), Butler Bros. faded away.”

By 1920, the building was complete and Butler Brothers had established their business at the site. The company quickly joined the Houston business community. It appears from the Sanborn Map of 1924 that the Butler Brothers Building was used for wholesale and merchandise. It does not indicate that any part of the building was used as a retail store. Offices inside the building fronted Washington Avenue.

The building's site at Washington and Elder is important to its significance. A dedicated railroad track serving the building ran directly from the main lines of the railroad to the building's loading dock. The south side of the building fronts Washington Avenue, which provided easy trucking access from the east and west. When the building was built, no other significant warehouses were located around the building. Next door to the warehouse and across Washington Avenue were numerous houses, two auto repair shops and the Houston Macaroni Company.

In Texas, the main business center for the Butler Brothers company was in Dallas, where Butler Brothers had established a large warehouse business by 1910. They also had a sample room in San Antonio at 233 W. Commerce. They advertised heavily in the major newspapers, and offered their expertise to those wanting to establish independent 5 and 10 cent stores.

Butler Brothers Company did not stay long in Houston. An article from the *Galveston Daily News* of December 10, 1924 reports that the Universal Terminal Warehouse Company, incorporated in Austin, had purchased the American Warehouse Company in Galveston and had leased the former Butler Brothers warehouse in Houston. The building was described as fire-proof, with an automatic sprinkler system and three-stories tall. The officers of the Universal Terminal Warehouse Company were all based in New York and had ties to the Baldwin Universal Company, a warehouse company in New York.

By 1926, Universal Terminal Warehouse Company's tenants included Graham Paper Company, Kelly-Springfield Tire Co., and the Universal Carloading & Distributor Co. In 1927, the building increased its tenancy to include: E.F. Hurd (manufacturer's agent), Hill Hulbert & Co., Brooks Visualizer, Visible Filing Systems, Rhino Stereo Inc., Anchor Cap & Closure Corporation, Capstan

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Glass Co., Do-More Health Chair Co., Hoffman U.S. Machinery Corporation, Straus-Frank Co. (radios), Kelly Springfield Tire Co., and the Graham Paper Company.

Samuel P. Fleming was the President and Manager of the Universal Terminal Warehouse in its early years. He had been the Treasurer of the American Warehouse Company in Galveston, which was acquired by the newly-formed Universal Terminal Warehouse Company. Fleming moved to Houston from Galveston, and lived in River Oaks at 2220 Stanmore Street. He died on March 14, 1935.

The building's list of tenants continued to grow. In the late 1930s-1940, Universal Terminal Warehouse Company advertised in the *Houston Port Book*. The company advertised merchandise, storage pool, car distribution, merchandise trucking, office space, and custom bonded availability at 1002-08 Washington Avenue. They also owned property around Crockett Street, Shearn Street, and Bingham Street.

In 1940 Henry F. Jonas and Tabor added the top two stories to the building. By that time there were other similar warehouses in Houston, including the well-known 1930 Merchants & Manufacturers Warehouse, the Houston Central Warehouse Company, the Houston & Texas Central Railroad Warehouse, and the 1920 Houston Terminal Warehouse & Cold Storage Plant. However, these were all located in downtown or east of downtown and took advantage of the one access point that the Butler Brothers site did not have – water. Still, the Universal Terminal Warehouse Company's tenancy was large throughout the 1950s.

By the publication in 1951 of new Sanborn maps, the neighborhood around the Butler Brothers warehouse had significantly changed. A Kraft Foods Co. warehouse replaced the numerous residential buildings located west of the building. Other warehouses and auto repairs shops in-filled what had been vacant land near the train tracks north of the site. The Greyhound Bus service and repair shop replaced the Henke & Pillot Stables further west on Washington. And warehouse and industrial uses replaced much of the housing around and near the site. In short, the area had turned commercial and industrial.

The building housed a U.S. Post Office Annex for many years. In 2009 the building was listed for sale and incorrectly identified at the time as the American Rice Building. The City of Houston purchased the building with the specific purpose of undertaking a LEED-certified renovation of the structure to house the Houston Permitting Center. Studio Red Architects led the project, with Trammell Crow Co. as the developer. The Butler Brothers Building reopened as the Houston Permitting Center in July 2011.

## **RESTORATION HISTORY AND CONDITION**

The Butler Brothers Building is an 184,432 square foot building located on a 106,809 square foot lot. The building faces south on the corner of Washington Avenue and Elder Street. The building is constructed of brick with a poured concrete structure. The design and siting of the Butler Brothers Building allowed for the distribution of products by rail and road.

The south façade of the building is utilitarian in style, exposing the horizontal and vertical lines of the concrete structure. The centered entry on the first floor features doors that are recessed from the front façade. The entrance is marked by a cast stone entablature over the entry. The two lights on either side of the door are not original but hang where the original lights stood.

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The end bays of the south façade contain decoration. Though minimal, the decoration sets the end bays apart and gives some differentiation to the building. At the top of the building is a concrete parapet with brick detailing. The brick detailing is laid in a herringbone pattern and a concrete diamond medallion marks the center of the parapet decoration. In addition, two vertical lines of horizontally laid brick flank the windows from the fourth to the second floor. These are suggestive of a pilaster and terminate with concrete caps at the top of the first floor. The builders of the circa 1940 addition continued decorative elements found on the original structure. With the addition of the two top stories, the Butler building shares many of the same elements as the 1917 Cheek- Neal Coffee Company building designed by Joseph Finger and James Ruskin Bailey. Although the two stories were added on much later, there is the possibility that Henry F. Jonas and Tabor drew inspiration from the Cheek-Neal Coffee building.

Original and non-original windows throughout the building have been replaced with new windows. The new windows are energy efficient and mimic the original windows in scale and material. The entry doors are also new and replaced non-original doors.

During the 2010 restoration, the east façade of the building, facing Elder Street, was reformatted as the main entry to the Houston Permitting Center. Here, historically, the building contained no ornament. The existing canopy over the loading dock has been rebuilt to allow for a green roof, and the area underneath it has been in-filled with large glass windows. Exterior garage bays were removed to allow a view and access to the interior. An entry and handicapped ramp have been added. Despite these changes, the building retains its character and is easily recognizable as a warehouse structure.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

“Damage from Blaze is Set at \$55,000,” *The Galveston Daily News*, April 25, 1933.

“Fleming” (Obituary), *The Galveston Daily News*, March 14, 1935.

“Heads of Three New Industries Address Rotarians at Luncheon”, *The Galveston Daily News*, July 23, 1920.

Houston City Directories.

Houston Port Book, 1930s (various editions).

“Land Sale Record”, *Daily Court Review*, September 30, 1932.

“New Warehouse Company Formed”, *The Galveston Daily News*, December 10, 1924.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1951.

Various resources from Ancestry.com

*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, Historic Preservation Officer, and Erin Glennon, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.*

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## 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**

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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;
- (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.

**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**

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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 Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Protected Landmark Designation of the Butler Brothers Building-City of Houston Permitting Center at 1002 Washington Avenue.

## **HAHC ACTION**

Recommended to City Council the Protected Landmark Designation of the Butler Brothers Building-City of Houston Permitting Center at 1002 Washington Avenue.

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## EXHIBIT A

BUTLER BROTHERS BUILDING  
1002-1008 WASHINGTON AVENUE



**EXHIBIT B  
SITE LOCATION MAP**

**BUTLER BROTHERS BUILDING  
1002-1008 WASHINGTON AVENUE**

