LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Judge and Mrs. J.A. Platt House
OWNER: Harry C. Pinson
APPLICANT: Same as Owner
LOCATION: 3311 Del Monte Drive – River Oaks

AGENDA ITEM: C
HPO FILE NO: 15L309
DATE ACCEPTED: Apr-15-2015
HAHC HEARING: May-21-2015

SITE INFORMATION: Tract 10, Block 8, River Oaks Country Club Estates, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site contains a historic two-story French Renaissance style house on a prominent location facing north on Del Monte Drive at River Oaks Boulevard.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Judge and Mrs. J.A. Platt House at 3311 Del Monte Drive at River Oaks Boulevard was constructed in 1936 from a design by celebrated Houston architect Joseph Finger. From the 1910s through the 1940s, Finger was one of Houston’s foremost architects and was the designer of many landmark buildings, including Houston’s City Hall.

Finger designed the elaborately detailed, 7,347-square-foot, two-story painted brick house at 3311 Del Monte Drive in the French Renaissance style. The house was completed in 1937 for Judge and Mrs. J.A. Platt at a cost of $40,000. Judge Platt (1884-1972) was an important associate of oil and lumber baron James M. West. The house was later owned by prominent Texas developer and entrepreneur Welcome W. Wilson, Sr.

The Judge and Mrs. J.A. Platt House at 3311 Del Monte Drive is significant for its occupants, architect, architecture and the role it played in Houston’s development, and meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 for Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

J. A. Platt

John Arthur “J.A.” Platt was born on April 17, 1884, in New Iberia, Louisiana. His father, B.A. Platt, was involved in business in Trinity County, Texas, for many years. B.A. eventually moved his family to Groveton, Texas, the Trinity County seat, where his son attended public school before entering the University of Texas at Austin. J.A. Platt graduated from UT in 1904 with a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degree and immediately returned to Groveton to open his practice.

In 1908, Platt was elected Trinity County attorney and served until 1912. The following year, he married Maude Dudley (1885-1976), the daughter of a prominent local lumberman. In 1914, Platt was elected district attorney of the Twelfth District; he held the office until 1918. One year later, Governor William P. Hobby appointed Platt district judge of the District Court of the Twelfth District; he served until 1920, when he resigned.

Platt moved to Houston in January 1921 and began working for James M. “Jim” West (1871-1941), whose business empire included ranching, banking, lumber, oil, newspaper publishing, and real estate.
West had grown up poor in Trinity County and dropped out of school to work as a water boy for the Trinity County Lumber Company in Groveton. As West’s vice president and general attorney, Platt would represent the West Lumber Company, South Texas Lumber Company, Fort Terrett Ranch Company, West Production Company, South Texas Hardwood Company, West Building Company, West Securities Company, and the Trinity Valley & Northern Railroad Company.

In February 1923, Platt was one of seventeen Houstonians who purchased two densely wooded tracts of land totaling 360 acres on the south side of Buffalo Bayou, two-and-a-quarter miles west of Montrose Boulevard. The erstwhile developers solicited memberships and stock subscriptions in their Country Club Estates Company at $100 for membership and $250 per share of stock. Their plans called for the construction of an 80-foot-wide boulevard between San Felipe Road and the proposed site of a country club and 180-acre golf course. Consulting engineer Herbert A. Kipp was retained to subdivide the rest of the tract into home sites along picturesque curved streets named for famous country clubs: Inwood, Del Monte and Chevy Chase.

The investors chartered River Oaks Country Club and commissioned noted Houston architect John F. Staub to design the Spanish Colonial style clubhouse. Scottish golf course designer Donald Ross was hired to plan the course. Although the country club was built and the subdivision plat was filed, the costs had driven the Country Club Estates Company into debt and no further work was carried out. In 1924, Will and Mike Hogg, the future developers of River Oaks, purchased all of the Country Club Estates Company’s holdings, which formed the centerpiece of their River Oaks Corporation. Coincidentally, Judge Platt would later build his family home on a prominent site in River Oaks’ original Country Club Estates section.

Platt would go on to represent Jim West in his frequently difficult dealings with Texas Governor Ross Sterling. Although Sterling was one of the founders of the Humble Oil Company, a forerunner of ExxonMobil, the governor had financial difficulties during his term in office from 1931 to 1932. In November 1931, Platt served as attorney for West Securities Company when the firm sold its stock in the Houston Post-Dispatch, Sterling’s flagship newspaper. The governor had gone before a judge to issue a restraining order preventing the sale, but Platt moved too quickly. In April 1932, Sterling was forced to sell his namesake skyscraper, the Sterling Building (1931, Wyatt C. Hedrick, demolished) on Texas Avenue in Houston. The governor owed more than $1.6 million to the West Securities Company on behalf of the West Building Company for the 21-story Art Deco structure. In December of the same year, Platt was the sole bidder when West Securities Company purchased Sterling’s real estate holdings in seven Texas counties plus stocks, bonds, notes, and oil leases for $18,750. The Houston Chronicle reported Sterling owed West more than $800,000 at the time of the sale.

Platt continued working for the West Securities Company through the 1960s. He and his wife lived in the house on Del Monte Drive until 1966 when they sold the property to Welcome W. Wilson, Sr. and his wife Joanne. J.A. Platt died on March 23, 1972, in Houston. He is buried at Forest Park Lawndale Cemetery.

Welcome W. Wilson, Sr.

Mr. and Mrs. Welcome W. Wilson, Sr. purchased 3311 Del Monte Drive in 1966. It remained their family home until 1996, when the current owners bought the house.
When Welcome Wade Wilson was born in 1928 in San Angelo, Texas, his parents argued over an appropriate name for their baby. His father, E.E. Wilson eventually said, “Let’s make him feel welcome,” and the name stuck. Wilson’s father owned radio stations in Corpus Christi and Brownsville, and the family later lived in both cities. As a teenager, Wilson worked as a newscaster, disc jockey, and station announcer while picking up extra income as a longshoreman on banana boats in Brownsville and becoming president of the student body at Brownsville Junior College.

E.E. Wilson believed Houston would become the largest city in the world, so he enrolled both his sons, Welcome and his younger brother Jack, in the University of Houston in 1946. Welcome Wilson worked on the student newspaper, The Cougar, and was eventually named one of the Ten Outstanding Students at UH. In 1949, he graduated with a Bachelor of Business Administration the same day he married his college sweetheart, Joanne Guest. He was almost immediately hired to raise funds and recruit new students for the UH College of Nursing. It would be his first experience in a long career of development for UH.

After the Korean War broke out, Wilson was drafted and sent to Japan for two years as a defense battalion commander. In 1953, he returned to Houston and became executive assistant to oilman, developer and philanthropist R.E. “Bob” Smith. At about the same time, Smith assigned Wilson to serve as chairman of the March of Dimes and assistant director of Civil Defense to help newly elected mayor Judge Roy Hofheinz.

In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower appointed Wilson, then 27 years old, director of Defense Mobilization for a five-state area. As a result of this assignment, he received the Arthur S. Flemming Award as one of Ten Outstanding Young Men in Federal Service for his work in the aftermath of Hurricane Audrey, which struck the region in 1957 and killed more than 300 residents of Cameron, Louisiana. Wilson continued serving in the Executive Office of the President under John F. Kennedy. He last spent time with Kennedy in Houston on November 21, 1963, the night before the president’s assassination.

In 1958, Wilson, his brother Jack, and four friends broke ground for Jamaica Beach, a resort community of second homes for middle-class buyers on the west end of Galveston Island. Bob Smith bought the land, resold it to the developers without requiring a down payment, and guaranteed a $250,000 loan. Today Jamaica Beach is an incorporated city with a population of about 1,000. The partners went on to develop several other resort communities in Galveston County, including Tiki Island, which is also an incorporated city.

When E.E. Wilson died in 1964, he left his sons more than 100 parcels of farm and ranch land in four counties in East Texas, including property on the north side of Houston. Welcome Wilson began developing six major apartment complexes in Houston that year and was one of the founding partners and chairman of Homestead Bank (later North Houston Bank) in 1965. By 1970, Wilson owned 18,000 acres in seven Texas counties and 10% of the Houston Astros baseball team. With his brother, he held the lease on the Astrodome.

Today, Wilson is chairman of GSL Welcome Group, a family-owned business, which holds four million square feet of single-tenant industrial and office facilities from Rosenberg to Conroe. As chairman of the University of Houston’s Tier One campaign, he was instrumental in achieving UH’s Carnegie-designated Tier One status. He has also served as a member and chairman of the UH System Board of Regents. Wilson has received Distinguished Alumnus awards from University of Texas at Brownsville –
Texas Southmost College (formerly Brownsville Junior College) as well as from the University of Houston and the UH C.T. Bauer College of Business. In 2011, the Texas Business Hall of Fame inducted Wilson as a Legend and Honoree and the Houston Technology Center named him “Entrepreneur of the Year.”

Joseph Finger

Joseph Finger was born on March 7, 1887, in Bielitz, in a section of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that is now part of Poland. He received his primary and secondary education in his hometown, and his father Henri wanted him to take over the family dry goods store. Instead, Joseph went to the Royal School in Vienna for technical training before immigrating to the United States in 1905.

Finger initially settled in New Orleans, but moved to Houston in 1908, where he worked as a draftsman in the branch office of Dallas architect C.D. Hill and Company. In 1912, he became the junior partner in the firm Green & Finger with Houston architect Lewis Sterling Green. Between 1914 and 1919, he was in partnership with James Ruskin Bailey. As Finger & Bailey, their work included the Sterne Building (1914-16) and the Cheek-Neal Coffee Company Building (1917). From 1920 to 1923, he was senior partner in Finger & Cato with Lamar Q. Cato.

Finger practiced under his own name from 1923 to 1944. During this time, he became very well known for his hotel designs, which served a mostly upper-middle class clientele. His work in Houston included the Ben Milam Hotel (1925, demolished), Auditorium Hotel (1926, later The Lancaster), Plaza Apartment Hotel (1926, later the Plaza-Tradition Bank) and the Texas State Hotel (1929, later Club Quarters) as well as hotels in Port Arthur and Texarkana, Texas, and Lake Charles, Louisiana.

During much of his career, Finger was best known for his exuberant modernistic designs. These included the Art Deco-style Houston Turn-Verein (1929, demolished), the A.C. Burton Company auto showroom (1929, demolished) and the streamlined Carnation Company creamery (1946-47, demolished). Jefferson Davis Hospital (1937, with Alfred C. Finn, demolished) and Houston City Hall (1939) exhibited more restrained modernistic detailing.

As the city's foremost Jewish architect from the 1910s through the 1940s, Finger frequently designed Jewish institutional buildings, as well as projects for individual Jewish clients. Among these were Temple Beth Israel (1925, later Heinen Theatre® at Houston Community College), Temple of Rest mausoleum (1935) and Congregation Beth Yeshurun Educational Building (1949, later Lucian L. Lockhart Elementary School, demolished). Finger designed his own family home, a duplex completed in 1926, at 120 Portland Place. Many of his other residential commissions were for prominent families in Riverside Terrace, often called the “Jewish River Oaks.” His works there include the Abe Weingarten House (1938), Joseph Weingarten House (1939) and Abe Battelstein House (1940).

Finger was a member of the American Institute of Architects, and of Congregation Beth Israel, the Independent Order of B'nai Brith, Houston Turn-Verein, Westwood Country Club, Houston Chamber of Commerce, and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.

From 1944 until his death, Finger was in partnership with George W. Rustay. At the time of his passing, Finger & Rustay's Harris County Courthouse (1953) was under construction in downtown Houston. Joseph Finger died on February 6, 1953. He is interred in the Temple of Rest, which he designed, in
Beth Israel Cemetery. He was survived by his wife, Gertrude Levy Finger, and one son, Joseph Seifter Finger, a landscape architect and golf course designer.

Designated Landmark Buildings designed by Joseph Finger in Houston and Harris County include:

- Auditorium Hotel (1926, later The Lancaster), Recorded Texas Historic Landmark.
- Cheek-Neal Coffee Company Building (1917), City of Houston Landmark.
- Houston City Hall (1939), City of Houston Protected Landmark, National Register of Historic Places.
- Houston Municipal Air Terminal (1940, later 1940 Air Terminal Museum), City of Houston Protected Landmark.
- Simon & Mamie Minchen House (1931), City of Houston Protected Landmark, Recorded Texas Historic Landmark, National Register of Historic Places.
- National Cash Register Building (1929), City of Houston Landmark.
- Sterne Building (1914-16), City of Houston Protected Landmark, National Register of Historic Places.
- Temple Beth Israel (1925, later Heinen Theatre at Houston Community College), Recorded Texas Historic Landmark, National Register of Historic Places.
- Texas State Hotel (1929, later Club Quarters), City of Houston Landmark, National Register of Historic Places.
- Joseph Weingarten House (1939), City of Houston Landmark.
- James & Jessie West Ranch House (1929-30), Recorded Texas Historic Landmark, National Register of Historic Places.

River Oaks

River Oaks is adjacent to Buffalo Bayou and Memorial Park in west central Houston. The residential garden suburb, which comprises 1,100 acres, was developed starting in the 1920s through the foresight and persistence of brothers Will Hogg (1875-1930) and Mike Hogg (1885-1941) and attorney Hugh Potter (1888-1968).

The nucleus of the expansive subdivision predates the Hoggs' and Potter's involvement. By 1924, Country Club Estates, the section south of the newly established River Oaks Country Club, had been platted, but not developed. The Hogg brothers bought out the original investors, including James West associate Judge J.A. Platt, and established Country Club Estates, Inc., later the River Oaks Corporation.

Mike Hogg's friend, Hugh Potter, was installed as president of the corporation. Under his expert direction, the development of River Oaks began in earnest. Not only was the existing section developed, the corporation also busily acquired land on all sides of the original Country Club Estates. Between 1926 and 1947, an additional 19 platted subdivisions were joined to River Oaks.

A study of noteworthy American suburban communities, particularly Roland Park in Baltimore and the Country Club District in Kansas City, was responsible for such innovative ideas as the institution of
architectural controls in River Oaks, the levying of a private tax to support a maintenance and services fund, and the creation of a property owners’ association to enforce deed restrictions.

Will Hogg was especially determined that River Oaks serve as a model of enlightened community planning standards for Houston. He retained Kansas City landscape architects Hare & Hare to provide a master plan that would protect the environmental integrity and natural beauty of the area. The developers also hired J.C. Nichols, who built Kansas City’s Country Club Plaza, one of the first major shopping centers in the United States, to serve as a design consultant.

The River Oaks master plan included home sites, a fifteen-acre campus for River Oaks Elementary School (1926, Harry D. Payne), two shopping centers, and esplanades planted with flowers. The plan called for underground utility lines, eliminated alleys, allowed only three intersecting streets and provided rigid building codes. 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 predates River Oaks, the William L. Clayton Summer Home, 3376 Inwood Drive (1924, Birdsall P. Briscoe), is a City of Houston Protected Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Among the other notable houses in the subdivision is Ima Hogg’s estate, Bayou Bend, (1928, John F. Staub with Birdsall P. Briscoe), which is a City of Houston Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. To date, more than 100 River Oaks houses have been designated as City of Houston Landmarks through the joint efforts of Preservation River Oaks and Preservation Houston.

River Oaks operated independently for three years before it was annexed by the City of Houston. In the late 1920s, the development lost money, but by the late 1930s developers had invested $3 million in the project and River Oaks had begun to influence development patterns in the rest of the city.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The residence at 3311 Del Monte Drive at River Oaks Boulevard in River Oaks Country Club Estates was constructed in 1936 by contractor E.T. Seymour of Beaumont from a design by celebrated architect Joseph Finger. The house was completed in 1937 for Judge & Mrs. J.A. Platt at a cost of $40,000. The 7,347-square-foot, two-story house faces north on a 44,172-square-foot corner lot. A 768-square-foot garage is not visible from the public right of way.

Finger designed the home in the French Renaissance style. The overall rectangular plan has slightly asymmetrical massing. The house is divided into five bays consisting of one bay on the east wing, three bays on the main house and one bay on the west wing. Quoins demarcate each of the five bays.

The house is clad in a painted brick veneer under a moderately pitched, hipped roof with flared eaves. A dentiled cornice delineates the roofline across all five bays of the house. Many of the windows and the main entryway are distinguished by Gibbs surrounds, classically inspired rusticated doorways and window frames consisting of alternating square and rectangular masonry blocks.

The first, east bay encompasses a recessed two-story wing with hipped roof. The view of the first floor is blocked by a brick garden wall with offset wrought iron gate. The second floor contains two symmetrically spaced 6 x 6 lite casement windows with fixed four-lite transoms.
The home’s second bay has an asymmetrical fenestration pattern containing two offset windows on the first floor. The window on the east side of the bay is a 10 x 10 lite casement window under a fixed eight-lite segmental arch transom with a Gibbs surround. A 10 x 10 lite casement window with fixed four-light transom and masonry sill is offset on the west side of the second bay.

The windows on the second floor of the second bay are directly above the first floor windows. The east window is an 8 x 8 casement with fixed four-lite transom. The window features a Gibbs surround topped by a round medallion and segmental arch dormer that projects slightly through the flared eave. The offset window on the west side is a 6 x 6 lite casement under a fixed four-lite transom. A hipped dormer with 6 x 6 lite casement window is centered between the two second-story windows in the north slope of the roof. The east slope of the roof contains a tall, narrow, chamfered masonry chimney with medieval-inspired decorative elements and two chimney pots.

The focal point of the projecting central (third) bay is an elaborately detailed, neoclassical entry surround that continues from the first floor through the second floor to culminate in a rounded arch dormer. The rectangular paneled door on the first floor is set into a Gibbs surround beneath a segmental arch with masonry escutcheon, which is beneath a large keystone. The decorative surround on the second floor incorporates large scrolls on either side of a small, bracketed masonry balcony with decorative metal railing. Opening onto the balcony is a pair of 10 x 10 lite French doors beneath a segmented, fixed four-lite transom. A keystone is centered in the masonry segmental arch above the transom. The central bay’s detailing ends in a rounded arch masonry dormer containing a square, four-light window. The dormer projects through the cornice and flared eave of the cross hipped roof.

The fourth bay has an asymmetrical fenestration pattern similar to that of the second bay. The east side of the bay contains an offset 8 x 8 casement window placed high in the wall between the first and second stories, which indicates the location of the interior staircase. The west side of the first floor contains 10 x 10 lite French doors with fixed eight-lite transom under a segmental arch with keystone.

The window on the east side of the fourth bay’s second story is a 6 x 6 casement with masonry sill. The window on the west side of the second floor is a 6 x 6 casement with fixed four-lite transom in a Gibbs surround topped by a round medallion and segmental arch dormer that projects slightly through the flared eave. A hipped dormer with 6 x 6 lite casement window is centered in the north slope of the roof between the two second-story windows.

The fifth, west bay contains a slightly recessed two-story wing. The wing’s first floor includes centered, multi-pane, triple French doors under a segmental arch with keystone. The second floor contains a central 4 x 4 lite casement window with fixed four-lite transom. A tall, narrow, masonry chimney rises from the south slope of the roof. Its decorative elements and pots match the chimney on the east side of the house.

Alterations

It is not clear how closely the house was built to follow the 1936 rendering published in the Houston Post. If the drawing is accurate (see pg.16), the first floor of the east bay has been altered to enclose a sleeping porch. The 1936 rendering and the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps indicate the first floor of the west bay has been altered to enclose a porte cochere. The driveway now curves around the west side of the house.
Louvered shutters mentioned in the City of Houston Architectural Survey (1980) and seen in the photograph that accompanied the survey (see pg.15) and the 1936 rendering were removed from the first floor at a later date.

According to the current owner, a master bedroom wing was built perpendicular to the east bay of the house in the 1970s. Based on satellite imagery, this brick two-story, rectangular wing has a flat-topped, hipped roof and extends to the south behind the original east bay. The added wing gives the house an overall L-shaped plan.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Books**


**Articles**


“Platt Appointed Judge.” *The Eagle* (Bryan, TX), November 15, 1919.


“Sterling Building Sold In Houston.” *Denton (TX) Record-Chronicle,* April 26, 1932.


**Archival Collections**


Houston City Directories.

Online Resources

“GSL Welcome Group – Role in Houston Development.”

“Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast.”


Kleiner, Diana J. "River Oaks, Houston." The Handbook of Texas Online,


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

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation

(a) The HAHC, 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:

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<td>(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;</td>
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<td>(2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;</td>
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<td>(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;</td>
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<td>(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;</td>
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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;

(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.

(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)).

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Judge and Mrs. J.A. Platt House at 3311 Del Monte Drive.

**HAHC RECOMMENDATION**

The Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Judge and Mrs. J.A. Platt House at 3311 Del Monte Drive.
EXHIBIT A
CURRENT PHOTOS
JUDGE AND MRS. J.A. PLATT HOUSE
3311 DEL MONTE DRIVE

Main façade looking south. Photo by David Bush, Preservation Houston, Apr. 7, 2015
EXHIBIT A
CURRENT PHOTOS
JUDGE AND MRS. J.A. PLATT HOUSE
3311 DEL MONTE DRIVE

Main façade looking south-southwest. April 7, 2015.
EXHIBIT B
SITE LOCATION MAP
JUDGE AND MRS. J.A. PLATT HOUSE
3311 DEL MONTE DRIVE

3311 Del Monte DR
EXHIBIT C
HISTORIC PHOTO
JUDGE AND MRS. J.A. PLATT HOUSE
3311 DEL MONTE DRIVE

Photocopy of original photo by Paul Hester.
**EXHIBIT D**

**HISTORIC RENDERING**

**JUDGE AND MRS. J.A. PLATT HOUSE**

3311 DEL MONTE DRIVE

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*Houston Post* clipping, September 6, 1936.

River Oaks Scrapbooks. Houston Metropolitan Research Center.
EXHIBIT E
SANBORN FIRE INSURANCE MAP
JUDGE AND MRS. J.A. PLATT HOUSE
3311 DEL MONTE DRIVE

Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Houston, 1934-August 1950, Vol. 11,
Sheet 1109, September 1935