

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: William A. Wilson House
OWNERS: Bill Baldwin and Joe Gonzalez
APPLICANTS: Same as Owners
LOCATION: 205 Bayland Avenue – Woodland Heights
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: VII.a
HPO FILE NO.: 08PL70
DATE ACCEPTED: Sep-5-08
HAHC HEARING: Nov-13-08
PC HEARING: Nov-20-08

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 1 and 2, Block 4, Woodland Heights Addition, and south 50 feet of Lot 2, Block 1, Manors at Woodland Heights, being a replat of the original Lots 3 thru 5, Block 4, Woodland Heights Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story, wood frame residence.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The William A. Wilson House at 205 Bayland Avenue was built in 1910 by Houston developer William Wilson as his own residence. Wilson founded the William A. Wilson Realty Company in 1898 and was an active participant in the development of the Houston Heights, Woodland Heights, and Eastwood neighborhoods. Wilson was also active in the community, serving on many boards, including the City of Houston's first Board of Park Commissioners. He is especially known for the many trees he planted in his residential subdivisions, which today provide a beautiful mature tree canopy in these historic Houston neighborhoods.

The Wilson House was the largest house on Bayland Avenue, the main thoroughfare of Woodland Heights. In the words of architectural historian Stephen Fox, the house's "lack of historically derived detail and its pronounced horizontality ally it with the progressive school of Chicago." The William A. Wilson House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 for Landmark and Protected Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

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, when the family moved to a home at 812 Heights Boulevard. The 1900 census indicated that Wilson and his wife, Mary, had a six-year-old daughter, three-year-old twins and a one-year-old baby son at that time. The couple eventually had another daughter and son. Wilson also built several homes in Houston Heights, mostly on Heights Boulevard, including 921 Heights, 1435 Heights and 1437 Heights -- all listed in the National Register of Historic Places and designated as City of Houston Landmarks.

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. The Wilson house was the largest house on Bayland Avenue, the main thoroughfare of Woodland Heights. Wilson's widow Mary remained in the home until 1938.

During this early period in Houston, Wilson began buying and selling houses. He built many homes in the Houston Heights as well as in other Houston neighborhoods such as the Empire Addition and Hyde Park. In 1898, he founded The William A. Wilson Company, making it one of the oldest and largest property developers in the city by the time of his death in 1928.

William A. Wilson began the development of the Woodland Heights in 1907 with the purchase of 136 acres located less than two miles northwest of downtown Houston on Houston Avenue. His offices, William A. Wilson Realty Company, Inc. were located downtown in the Commercial National Bank Building at 415-417-419 Main Street. He began his first major housing development during a time of world-wide expansion. Marguerite Johnston states that “the Paris Exposition and the opening of the Eiffel Tower in 1889 began the modern era for the western world.” In 1900, the population of the United States had reached 75 million and, in Texas, the population was 3 million. Houston’s population was 44,633. The United States had become the main industrial country in the world. The national trend from the farm to the city had begun and the businessman had become an important figure in society. Texas was entering a new era following the discovery of oil at Spindletop in Beaumont, Texas, in 1901, and at the Humble Oil Field in 1905. With the supply of energy and good business conditions, the state moved into more aggressive economic development. In Houston, business leaders focused on the development of a port that would allow direct access to the sea. This idea was initially discounted by many until the destruction of Galveston by a hurricane in September 1900. The devastation of Galveston supported the eventual federal appropriation of funds to develop the Houston port in 1902. The timing of economic development and population expansion in the Houston area created a market for a greater number of homes for moderate income families such as the Woodland Heights.

Wilson carefully planned his new, strictly residential community for this expanding middle-class population. 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. Whereas slightly older communities nearby lacked more modern conveniences, 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. A 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 the 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 streets ‘Helen’ and ‘Florence’ are named after Wilson’s daughters.

Woodland Heights was marketed to the growing wishes of the population to escape the noise and congestion of the city. This type of development was facilitated by the development of the electric streetcar lines that provided transportation to workers. Woodland Heights was one of Houston's 'streetcar suburbs' – made possible by the development of new electric streetcar lines that provided transportation to workers. According to Margaret Culberson, the Houston Avenue streetcar line stopped “at the beautiful Woodland Heights gates spanning Bayland Avenue.” In 1894, Wilson was involved in the development of the Houston & Fairview Street Railway Company. This line was sold to Houston & Suburban Street Railway, also headed by Wilson.

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." Of the houses illustrated in promotional materials as being built by the Wilson Company, the predominant design was the bungalow. Wilson did not supply all of the houses built in the Woodland Heights. Developers such as Wilson found books of bungalow house plans useful in their efforts to create new neighborhoods that would appeal to a rapidly expanding middle class, and the design influence of the bungalow books of the period is clear.

In addition to his professional endeavors, Wilson was very active in community service. He served on the Heights School Board in 1898, according to Sister Agatha. In 1908, he was the president of the Board of the Texas Christian Sanitarium. Also in 1908, Wilson served on the board of the YMCA and remained on this board until his death in 1928. 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, serving with other prominent Houstonians, Edwin B. Parker and George H. Hermann, and helped to establish Hermann Park. He was a member of the First Methodist Church and a member of the Holland Lodge No. 1, A.F. and M.F. According to the Handbook of Texas, this lodge was the first Masonic Lodge chartered in Texas in 1836, issued by John Henry Holland, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana at that time. Wilson published a magazine for several years called "Homes." According to Pace and Markey, this magazine "not only promoted his building projects but contained articles oriented to the general interest of homeowners." Wilson went on to develop Eastwood in 1911, another planned neighborhood of approximately 1000 lots in Houston's East End. Wilson carefully planned and created an environment aimed at "a distinctively high-class home center." Eastwood attracted many prominent Houston families.

Wilson's widow remained in the house at 205 Bayland Avenue until 1938. From 1938-1967, the house was operated as a nursing home. In the years 1967-1979, various owners used the house as a bed and breakfast and/or artist commune. In 1979-2005, the house was purchased by Cynthia Huete Villasenor and operated as St. Jude Assisted Living Inc. During this period, the house seriously deteriorated. In November 2005, the house was purchased by Bill Baldwin and Joe Gonzales who completed its renovation and restoration.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

William Wilson built the house at 205 Bayland Avenue as his own personal residence in 1910. He lived in the house until his death in 1928, and his widow stayed in the home until 1935. She then sold the house to a family from New Orleans, who made many aesthetic changes to the house. In 1978, the house was purchased with the intent to convert it to a bed and breakfast, but it ultimately became an artists' commune where local artists could rent a room for studio and display space. The house eventually became St. Jude's Assisted Living which ran a shelter for disadvantaged individuals until purchased by the current owners in November 2005.

The current owners extensively restored the exterior much as it was in 1910, by recreating the cypress siding, custom-making the windows, restoring the porches, and duplicating the elaborate trim details that wrap around the house and the flared siding at the first and second levels of the house. The porch enclosure, a later alteration, was removed, and the porch was restored to its original footprint and detailing. Asbestos siding was removed, and the siding was restored using wood siding of the same type and profile as the original siding. Although the interior was modified, the exterior walls and window

placement remain as original. According to architectural historian Stephen Fox, the house “remains the most prominent and unusual example of the Progressive Style,” and he associates it with the progressive school of Chicago.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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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:

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

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);
- (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 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 William A. Wilson House at 205 Bayland Avenue.

WILLIAM A. WILSON HOUSE
205 BAYLAND AVENUE



SITE LOCATION MAP
WILLIAM A. WILSON HOUSE
205 BAYLAND AVENUE
NOT TO SCALE

