

## PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK/SITE NAME:** William L. Connelly House

**OWNER:** Maura O’Dowd and Philip Hilder

**APPLICANT:** Maura O’Dowd and Philip Hilder, prepared by Thomas McWhorter, Greater Houston Preservation Alliance

**LOCATION:** 218 Avondale Boulevard – Avondale Addition

**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** N/A

**AGENDA ITEM:** I

**PLANNING COMMISSION:** 06-22-06

**HPO FILE NO.:** 06PL21

**DATE ACCEPTED:** May-20-06

**HAHC HEARING DATE:** 6-15-06

### SITE INFORMATION

Tract 5 and 6A, Block 8, Avondale Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic two-story, wood frame residence.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation for residence

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

William L. Connelly, who owned the house at 218 Avondale Boulevard, was one of Houston’s most famous oil entrepreneurs. His business acumen and determination when combined with others like him, would eventually transform Houston into the energy capital of the world. His Prairie style home, built on Avondale Boulevard in the fashionable and exclusive Avondale Addition, was originally built by J. J. Carroll, a partner in the lumber firm of W. T. Carter and Brothers. J. J. Carroll married the daughter of Carter, who was one of Houston’s leading citizens and businessman. The Russell Brown Company, which built the home in 1917, was a leader in Texas home design and construction, which provided prestigious homes for many of the elite citizens of Houston as well as Texas.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The William L. Connelly House is located at 218 Avondale within the Avondale subdivision. Avondale was one of several upscale, “suburban” neighborhoods at the time, which included Westmoreland, Courtlandt Place, Audubon Place, and Montrose. The neighborhood, first platted in 1907, was home to many of Houston’s early 20<sup>th</sup> Century social and business elite. Avondale offered several attractive perks to upper echelon Houstonians. All unsightly utility lines and garbage bins were accessed from the alleyways behind every home. The concrete curbs and sidewalks were tinted a pleasing shade of pink so as not to strain the eye in the afternoon sun. Furthermore, no businesses, boarding houses, or structures costing less than \$5,000 were allowed within the neighborhood. The developers touted it as a “first class neighborhood.” The streets were landscaped with a variety of oaks, palms, and camphor trees planted by the fledgling Teas Nursery.

Houston boomed after major oil strikes in nearby East Texas oilfields, like Spindletop and Goose Creek. Tulsa, Oklahoma was the undisputed oil capitol of the world, but Houston played host to many of the men who amassed great fortunes from the booming oil industry. William L. Connelly, like many of his neighbors who moved to the fashionable new Avondale subdivision, was in the oil business. The neighborhood was close to the downtown business district, but far enough away from the hustle and bustle to accommodate spacious homes, large lawns, and broad streets. Today, the Eastern portion of the Avondale subdivision, including the 100 Blocks of Avondale and Stratford, has been designated as a City of Houston Historic District, one of seven thus far designated by City Council. The home at 218 Avondale is located outside of the Avondale East Historic District, although the residents of the western portion of the neighborhood are currently petitioning property owners to try to create an adjacent historic district.

William L. Connelly was born on January 31, 1873 to a second generation Irish Catholic family in Cleveland, Ohio. Connelly's family immigrated to America in 1842. His father, William Connelly, and his Uncle John Connelly, operated a boiler shop in Cleveland that supplied the nearby oil boomtowns of Bruin and Petrolia, Pennsylvania. In the years immediately after W. L. Connelly's birth, his family moved to Bradford, Pennsylvania to be closer to the oilfield business, in which they were already so much involved. (1) During his time in Pennsylvania, W.L. Connelly experienced first hand, the inner workings of the oil business. It was in public school in Bradford, Pennsylvania that young William L. Connelly met classmate, Tom Donoghue, who would become a life long friend and later the first Vice President of The Texas Company. (5)

Connelly began his first endeavor in the oil business with the opening of his own boiler shop in Prairie Depot, Ohio in 1895. (1) Boilers played a crucial role in the oil drilling business during this time period, and Connelly's business was responsible for their repair and upkeep. The steam operated engines were piston driven power plants which would cause the oil derrick to pump subterranean oil to the surface in much the same way that a windmill draws water from underground water tables. Fortunately for Connelly's business, these machines were prone to malfunction before the introduction of gasoline powered units. Without a properly functioning boiler, an oil drilling operation was crippled.

Shortly after Connelly opened his first business, he took out a \$100 loan from a Toledo bank in order to secure his one-third interest in the first oil well he ever drilled. The well paid off producing one hundred barrels a day which at that time sold for \$1.27 a barrel. In 1896 Connelly and several other partners formed the Donnelly Oil Company. This was the beginning of a career in the oil business which lasted for the next sixty years. (1)

In 1898, W. L. Connelly married Elizabeth Conlisk, who would remain with Connelly for the next fifty years. In 1903 the Connellys relocated to Independence, Kansas. (1) It was in Independence that Connelly met Harry Sinclair, the founder of Sinclair Oil, and Sinclair became Connelly's lifelong business partner. (1)

Connelly first went to work for Harry Sinclair in 1906 as a contract oil well driller. Over the course of the next several years Connelly's business, dealing with Sinclair, increased as Sinclair's business grew. Their business together expanded to the then Indian Territory, which became Oklahoma later in 1906. Connelly and Sinclair later moved their operations to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1913. Sinclair amassed great wealth and power through his acquisitions of independent oil producing wells throughout Oklahoma Texas and Mexico. Sinclair Oil was officially founded in 1916 in Tulsa, Oklahoma with W. L. Connelly as his right hand man. Sinclair Oil exists to this very day and is widely recognized for its dinosaur mascot. (6)

W. L. Connelly eventually became Vice President to many of Sinclair Oil Corporation's pipeline, drilling, and refining companies, as well as a bevy of smaller independent companies also owned by Sinclair. These included The Freeport & Mexican Fuel Oil Corporation, Freeport and Tampico Fuel Oil Transportation Corporation, Sinclair Gulf Oil Co., Sinclair Gulf Refining Co., and Sinclair Gulf Pipeline Co. (4) Although headquartered in Tulsa, Sinclair had a sizeable interest in the Gulf Coast region, where Houston was the regional capitol of the oil industry.

W. L. Connelly and his family moved to Houston, Texas in 1917 to oversee The Mexican and Gulf Coast interests of Sinclair Oil. It was in October of that same year that Connelly purchased the handsome new home at 218 Avondale.

J. W. Stanford, who was Secretary Treasurer for several of the Sinclair companies, also lived three doors down at 210 Avondale. And Connelly's life long friend, Tom Donoghue, who was Vice President of The Texas Company, lived at 17 Courtlandt Place, a short two block walk from 218 Avondale. Houston was William

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Connelly's home base for the next five years. It was in 1918 that Connelly oversaw the construction of Houston's first large petroleum refinery for Sinclair Oil. (7) In the years to follow, the Houston area would become home to one of the largest concentrations of refineries in the country. During his tenure in Houston and afterwards, Connelly traveled the world on business trips for Sinclair Oil, that took him to Angola, Austria, Cuba, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela. While in Rome, Connelly was personally received by Pope Pius XI, who later bestowed upon him in 1933 the title of Knighthood. (1) Connelly and his family lived in the home at 218 Avondale until 1923, when W. L. Connelly was transferred to Casper, Wyoming to oversee drilling at the Teapot Dome oil lease, which would later become embroiled in scandal under the Coolidge administration.(1)(7)

The house at 218 Avondale was built on speculation for J. J. Carroll, a partner in the lumber firm of W. T. Carter and Brothers, owned by Carroll's in-laws. (5) Carroll sold the recently completed home to William L. Connelly in October 1917, for \$11,700 plus seven percent interest. (3) The new home was constructed by The Russell Brown Company of Dallas and Houston. (3, 2) The company was responsible for many of the fine homes in Avondale, Westmoreland, Courtlandt Place, Montrose (including the home of future Governor Ross Sterling on Yoakum Blvd), Broadacres, and River Oaks. (2,3). The Russell Brown Company published a catalog of some of their completed projects in 1919, titled Modern Homes. The home at 218 Avondale is included in this book, which also contains a black and white photo of the front elevation, as well as floor plans for the home's first and second floors. The home was one of only forty one structures included in this book.

The new home was designed in the Prairie Style. It is an unusual home in that the home was styled with a blend of Craftsman, Prairie and Mediterranean influences, a style departure from many of the homes on Avondale. The stucco clad home is two-story, built on a raised brick pier foundation with an enclosed crawl space. It is four bays in width, fronting on Avondale. The first and second floors of the main façade feature four large banks of windows comprised of three double-hung windows per bay. The windows alternate from narrow six-over-one windows to wider variations of the same type. A two level, enclosed sun porch features a large bank of three pairs of 8 light casement windows, capped by fixed sash multi-paned transoms. The main entry is located within an offset, raised bay approximately ten feet in width, which extends vertically the full height of the structure. The entry bay extends outward approximately 12 inches from the front façade. The offset entryway is comprised of a wood paneled door with transom light above which is sheltered beneath a shallow, bracketed overhang. Wall niches are integrated into the front façade on either side of the main entrance. The second floor of the entry bay is characterized by a bank of four sets of multi-paned double-hung, wood sash windows capped by a modified fanlight transom. This stylistic element is repeated again in the roof line in this section. The roof is a broad, hipped roof composed of composition shingles. The roof structure exhibits wide eaves supported by decorative rafter tails.

The Eastern façade of the home is characterized by a sun room wing, one room in depth and two stories in height, which extends in an easterly direction from the main body of the home. The sun room wing features banks of eight pane casement windows, which are operated by means of mechanical cranks found on the interior window casings – which are utilized both on the bottom and top floors on each of the home's North, East, and South elevations. There are three banks of casement windows on both the northern and southern facades and two banks of casement windows on the eastern façade of the sunroom wing. The pairs of casement windows are capped by fixed four pane transoms. A continuous course of evenly spaced, decorative scroll brackets extend from each of the three elevations of the sun room wing, which delineates the first floor from the second floor.

The southern façade is two stories in height. It is built in a step back formation with three projecting portions of the home, beginning with the shallowest sun room wing to the southeast corner and gradually increasing in

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depth until its terminus at the southwest corner. The step back is at its deepest point on the southwest corner of the home, where a one room, single story enclosed kitchen wing, extends from the southwest corner in a southerly direction. This kitchen wing, which appears in the floor plans published in the Russell Brown book of 1919, is topped by an open air sun porch, which is not original to the structure. The southern elevation repeats the motif of varying sizes of six pane over single pane windows, as found in the main façade, as well as with pairs of casement windows, which are the same type used in the two-story sun room wing. A single modern door leads from the kitchen room onto a shallow deck, which is a modern alteration. A pair of French doors leads from the main body of the home onto the same rear deck, which may also be a later alteration.

The western façade of 218 Avondale is a relatively unadorned elevation. The façade is an uninterrupted, two-story wall, pierced by occasional six-over-one pane windows of different sizes and configurations. This elevation is relatively plain with the exception of the use of decorative eave brackets as found elsewhere on the perimeter of the building.

The home suffered fire damage in 1998, when another Russell Brown designed home, next door at 220 Avondale, caught fire which spread to 218 Avondale. The home at 218 Avondale was restored shortly thereafter, but 220 Avondale was eventually torn down to make way for three-story townhouses. In 2005 attorney, Philip Hilder, purchased the home at 218 Avondale, to preserve this architecturally and historically significant home.

### Sources Cited:

1. The Oil Business As I saw It ; Connelly, W.L. University of Oklahoma Press 1954
2. Modern Homes; The Russell Brown Co. Houston....Dallas circa 1919
3. Harris County Deed Records 1910-1940
4. Houston City Directories; 1910-1940 Morrison Fourmy Publishing
5. Houston Architectural Guide; The American Institute of Architects/ Houston Chapter & Herring Press 1990
6. Sinclair Oil Corporation: Sinclair History
7. "Houston, Texas"; The Handbook of Texas Online, Texas State History Association

*The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, and edited by Randy Pace, Historic Preservation Officer, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston, 713/837-7796 or Randy.Pace@cityofhouston.net.*

### APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION:

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

- (a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider three or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the Protected Landmark designation. If the HAHC reviews an application for designation of a Protected Landmark initiated after the designation of the Landmark, the HAHC shall review the basis for its initial recommendation for designation and may recommend designation of the landmark as a protected landmark unless the property owner elects to designate and if the landmark has met at least (3) three of the criteria of Section 33-224 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance (HPO) at the time of its designation or, based upon additional information considered by the HAHC, the landmark then meets at least (3) three of criteria of Section 33-224 of the HPO, as follows:

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- | 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.
- OR**
- The property was constructed before 1905;
- 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;
- OR**
- The property was designated as a State of Texas Recorded Texas Historical Landmark.

### **PUBLIC HEARING ON JUNE 15, 2006: NO OPPOSITION**

#### **STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

That the Houston Planning Commission accepts the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommends Landmark and Protected Landmark designation to City Council for the William L. Connelly House at 218 Avondale Boulevard.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

That the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends Landmark and Protected Landmark designation to the Houston Planning Commission for the William L. Connelly House at 218 Avondale Boulevard.

SITE LOCATION MAP  
WILLIAM L. CONNELLY HOUSE  
218 AVONDALE BOULEVARD  
Not to Scale