

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT**LANDMARK NAME:** Spencer and Lela Robinson House**OWNERS:** Khalin Washington**APPLICANTS:** SAME AS OWNER**LOCATION:** 3019 Gray Street, Houston, Texas 77004**SITE INFORMATION:** Lot 17, Block 1, Pierce Court, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas**AGENDA ITEM:** B**HPO FILE NO.:****DATE ACCEPTED:** 02/21/2023**HAHC HEARING:** 03/23/2023

The site includes a 1.5-story wood frame brick veneer single-family residence, a one-story wood frame garage, and a small wood frame shed. The garage is a contributing element.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Protected Landmark Designation**HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:**

The Robinson House is a 1929 1 ½-story wood frame Tudor Revival cottage with Craftsman elements located in the Pierce Court neighborhood, near the current northern edge of Houston’s Third Ward. The Robinson family owned the house through its entire history until the recent passing of Della Robinson in 2022. Khalin Washington, a longtime neighbor and close family friend who now owns the home, is seeking a City of Houston Protected Landmark designation for the property.

The Robinson House is a unique example of the Tudor Revival and Craftsman styles in a historically segregated neighborhood within the larger primarily African American Third Ward; it is among the most intact small residents remaining in the neighborhood. The Robinson family included Lela Robinson, a long-time employee of the Harris County Welfare Department who was an active and respected community member and is recognized as a pioneer among Black social workers in Houston. The property meets criteria 1, 3, 4, and 5 for Landmark designation and Criterion 1 for Protected Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE*PIERCE COURT*

Pierce Court consists primarily of one-story residences and was developed in the mid-1920s as a segregated neighborhood with houses marketed to Black residents. A small eight-block area bordered by Sauer Street, Hadley Street, Nettleton Street, and the Gulf Freeway, the neighborhood developed later than its immediate neighbors. Developer E. J. Burke first advertised the neighborhood in 1925 with six brick veneer bungalows for sale featuring wood floors, built-in elements, and “modern conveniences.”¹ Lots with houses also had concrete walkways and driveways, and the neighborhood’s streets were originally paved with shells. Douglass Elementary School, a school for Black students built in 1926, anchored the neighborhood on its southern end. The northernmost blockface of the neighborhood, which

¹ *Houston Chronicle*, September 27, 1925: 24.

included a few more elaborate bungalows and the Fourth Missionary Baptist Church, was demolished around 1980.²

Pierce Court was one of Burke's first six developments; he had also begun development of the larger Pinecrest Court, also designated for Black residents, a few years prior. Burke developed Pierce Court during a time of rapid growth of his company, originally established as the Peoples Home Investment Company in 1923. In 1926 he changed the name to the E. J. Burke Company, increased capital stock from \$50,000 to \$500,000, and moved into a new office in the First National Bank Building.³ Beyond developing subdivisions, the company also offered mortgages, bonds, and real estate loans. Burke also owned the E. J. Burke Lumber Company at 4100 Lyons Avenue.

OWNER HISTORY OF 3019 GRAY STREET

Spencer Newton Robinson (b. January 26, 1901; d. March 4, 1977)

Lela Alice Jordan Robinson (b. January 12, 1902; d. May 17, 1999)

Della Robinson (b. November 3, 1951; d. August 28, 2022)

Spencer Newton Robinson was born in Hallettsville, Texas on January 26, 1901 to parents Abner Robinson and Della Chase. By 1920, his family had relocated to Shiner, where he lived with his father and his sister Eloise. Robinson had arrived in Houston by 1925. Lela Alice Jordan was born in January 1902 in Harris County to parents Johnnie Jordan and Margaret Thompson. After graduating from Houston Colored High School (now Booker T. Washington High School), she wished to pursue higher education despite her family's financial difficulties after her father's untimely death at age 27. Lela attended Tuskegee Institute in Alabama with assistance from the United Negro College Fund and her younger brother John, who left school to earn the funds for her train ticket.⁴ After graduating in 1923, she worked as a schoolteacher in Lavaca and Navarro counties for nearly a decade. During this time she completed further studies at Prairie View State Normal & Industrial College (now Prairie View A&M University).

In 1925 Spencer Robinson worked as a porter for the Germaline Chemical Company in Houston. In May 1928, Robinson purchased an unimproved lot in Pierce Court from developer E.J. Burke for \$1200. In March 1929 he contracted with carpenter Archie Thompson, believed to be Lela's uncle, to build "a five room brick veneer residence and garage" for \$3400. Two months later, on May 22, 1929, Spencer Robinson and Lela Alice Jordan were married. After a brief volunteer period with the Houston-Harris County Department of Welfare, Lela Robinson was hired full time around 1931 and began a 39-year career there. Early in her career, Mrs. Robinson pursued additional education at the Atlanta University School of Social Work. Mr. Robinson continued to work as a porter or shipping clerk at the Germaline Chemical Company until at least 1942.

The Robinsons' daughter, Della Margaret Robinson, was born November 3, 1951. After graduating from San Jacinto Senior High School in 1970, Della studied fashion design and merchandising in Atlanta,

² 1976 and 1981 aerial photos, historicaerials.com

³ "E. J. Burke Co. Is New Name of Real Estate Concern." *Houston Chronicle*, November 17, 1926: 25.

⁴ "Getting an education made a big difference." *Houston Chronicle*, June 5, 1997: 4D.

Georgia and Arlington, Texas. She later returned to Houston and worked in administrative roles for People in Partnership and the Casey Initiative. She also participated in youth ministry programs at Antioch Church. Spencer Robinson died in 1977 at age 76 and was buried in Paradise North Cemetery in northwest Houston. Lela Robinson remained in the house until her death in 1999, and Della Robinson continued to live there until her death in August 2022. Before her passing, Della Robinson initiated the effort to obtain a Protected Landmark designation for the house.

Lela Robinson completed most of her career during the Jim Crow era and is recognized as a pioneer in social work among Houston's Black community.⁵ She remained steadfast in her career and became a respected social worker despite experiencing instances of racism from colleagues and being prohibited from serving white women who needed assistance.⁶ While she worked as an assistant supervisor in addition to field casework, Mrs. Robinson later declined a position as supervisor due to her desire to continue working directly with families in the field.⁷ She was respected in the community as a long-time member of Antioch Baptist Church and as a YWCA Life Member. In 1997, at age 95, she was recognized as one of the oldest living graduates of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) in Houston.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The house at 3019 Gray Street is a 1.5-story wood frame Tudor Revival and Craftsman residence on a concealed pier and beam foundation, built in 1929. The house sits in the middle of a block in a quiet residential neighborhood. A concrete driveway runs along the east side of the house and leads to a detached wood frame garage, also built in 1929, on the northeast corner of the lot. A small wood frame shed is also located in the rear yard. Both outbuildings are clad in wood drop siding and are in fair condition. The house, which was built by a family member, is distinct from the surrounding Craftsman bungalows constructed by the developer of the neighborhood. It does, however, exhibit some of the Craftsman details and the use of brick veneer found throughout Pierce Court, especially in the neighborhood's earlier houses.

A straight concrete walkway leads from the sidewalk to the house's entry terrace, which sits east of center. The use of a terrace instead of a bungalow porch sets the Robinson House apart from its neighbors as a unique expression of the style in the neighborhood. The house has a side gable roof with a moderate pitch and boxed eaves. The roof is covered with asphalt shingles and features two front gabled dormers clad in wood drop siding. The gables feature decorative half timbering in stucco and wood. The house is otherwise clad in variegated brick veneer in running bond. Soldier courses frame the veneered portion at the base and top, just below the belt band. An exterior brick chimney is located on the east elevation near the front of the house.

⁵ Lewis et al., *In the Spirit of Sankofa: Houston's Black Pioneers in Social Work*, 51-52.

⁶ Ibid.; "Getting an education made a big difference." *Houston Chronicle*, June 5, 1997: 4D.

⁷ "Harris County Welfare Department...An Emergency Agency." *Forward Times*, Date unknown: 46.

The front (southwest) elevation is asymmetrical. The west (left) side consists of a projecting front gable with a two-part wood belt band below. The top portion of the belt band is peaked in the center; this detail is repeated in all visible gables. A trio of ganged 1-over-1 wood windows with a continuous brick sill is centered on this bay. The windows extend to the belt band above and interrupt the top soldier course; a pair of stacked headers marks the transition between the soldier course and the windows on each side. The windows are covered with security grates and screens. The gable is finished with decorative half timbering in stucco and wood. A double wood vent is centered in the gable. The east (right) bay is roughly symmetrical with the front door flanked by 1-over-1 wood windows covered with metal security grates and screens. The front door, likely a mid-20th-century replacement, is wood with raised decorative trim. It sits behind an aluminum storm door. The entrance is centered on a terrace with concrete front steps, brick piers, and a substantial brick balustrade. The terrace is uncovered except for a small projecting gable sheltering the front door. The gable is supported by triangular knee braces with an arched header and is also half timbered.

The east and west sides of the house feature large half-timbered gables with 16-light double casement windows. The ground-level veneer coursing and window details match those on the front of the house. The west side includes two ganged 1-over-1 windows toward the front and two smaller 1-over-1 windows toward the rear. A small one-story rear addition clad in wood drop siding is visible at the rear of the house. The east side includes smaller 1-over-1 wood windows flanking the exterior chimney toward the front of the house, three ganged 1-over-1 windows in the center, and two ganged 1-over-1 windows toward the rear.

RESTORATION HISTORY

The house remains substantially unchanged from its original construction. The replacement of the front door is the only known exterior alteration. Based on early Sanborn maps and tax assessment records identifying the house as a single story, the dormers might have been added after the original construction.

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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 Yasmin Arslan, 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:

S	NA	S - satisfies	D - does not satisfy	NA - not applicable
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EXHIBIT A CURRENT PHOTOS



Southwest (front) elevation, facing northeast



Southwest corner and adjacent buildings, facing east



Terrace and entrance, facing northeast



Garage, facing northeast



Shed, facing northeast

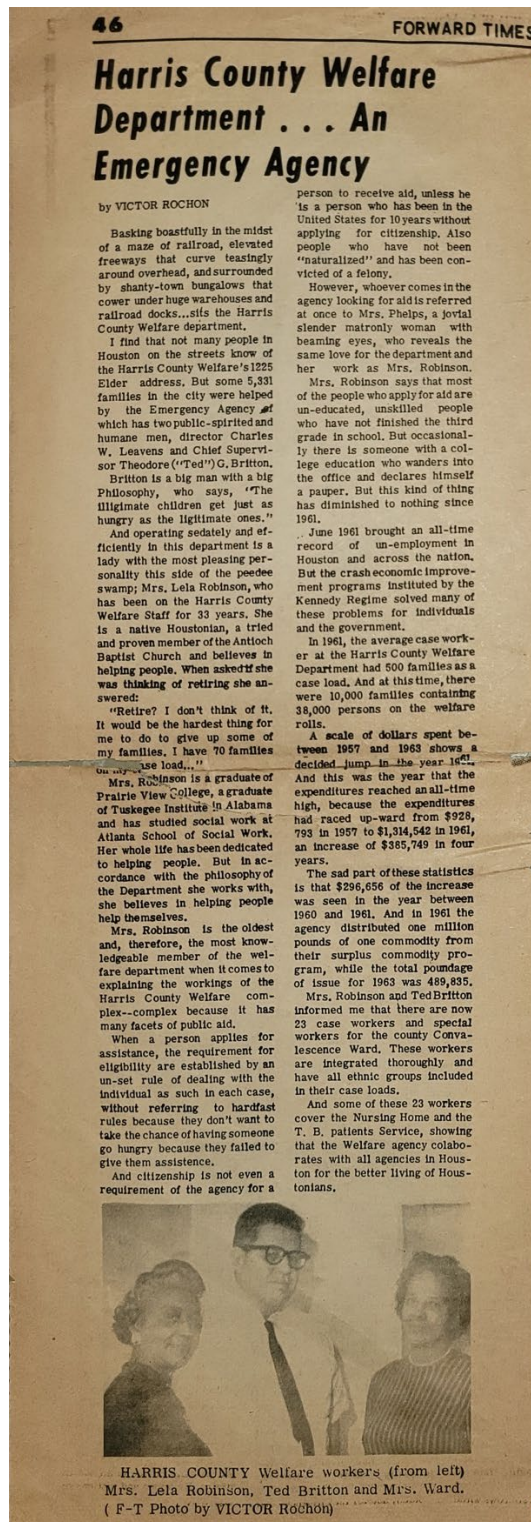
CITY OF HOUSTON

Houston Archaeological & Historical Commission
Department

Planning and Development

EXHIBIT B SANBORN MAP – 1950 (VOLUME 9, SHEET 902)





HARRIS COUNTY Welfare workers (from left) Mrs. Lela Robinson, Ted Britton and Mrs. Ward. (F-T Photo by VICTOR ROCHON)

Forward Times, c. 1964

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Getting an education made a big difference

Three respected black women to be honored

By **CHERYL LAIRD**
Houston Chronicle

Mrs. Holliday is the flashy one with the high heels and confident stride.

Mrs. Young is the easy-talking one with the long legs and sensible dress.

Mrs. Robinson is the quiet one with the slight frame and generous spirit.

Ella Robey Holliday is the youngest at age 90. Hazel Hainsworth Young is 91, and Lela Jordan Robinson is 95.

They command such respect in the local African-American community that, as Jene Washington, a 42-year-old acquaintance, says, "I wouldn't dare call any of them by their first names."

Growing up in a time when the monster of racial prejudice tried to stomp out initiative, these three women battled and won.

"They are very strong, courageous women," said

See **WOMEN** on Page 4D.

From left, Hazel Young, Ella Holliday and Lela Robinson, all women in their 90s who graduated from college in the '20s, are being honored tonight as role models.



Kerwin Plevka / Chronicle

CITATION (MLA STYLE)

Houston Chronicle, "Three Star ed., 5 June 1997, p. 43. NewsBank America's News - Historical and Current. info@newsbank.com/apps/newstocurrent/view?r=AMNEWS&docref=page&v=2/3/14028391C4032284N406ANX-NB-1724F114827E248C140240505-1724F03BEE0085A94064-1724F03BEE0085A94064. Accessed 26 Sept. 2022.

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Houston Chronicle, June 5, 1997.