## Historic Preservation

## Courtland Place: A Century of Living

By Sallie Gordon and Penny Iones



Old postcard depicting the west entry open to Lovett Boulevard.

Début
Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

The more things change, the more they
remain the same.d— French proverb

Rambunctious, unrestricted growth reigned in early 20th-century Houston as the proliferation of streetcar lines and emergence of the automobile pushed the familiar boundaries of the city outward. Commercialism expanded southward from its traditional center at Smith and Prairie and encroached upon the elegant mansions of the city's elite. Their response was flight and the formation of private residential enclaves to buffer the chaos. These new neighborhoods emulated the subdivisions made popular in St. Louis, Missouri, in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century known as the "Private Places." Westmoreland Place, platted in 1902, was Houston's first Private Place neighborhood, and Courtlandt Place joined it four years later as a smaller, more compact and ultimately more robust sibling.

In September of 1906, Sterling Meyer, A.L. Hamilton and T.A. Cargill formed The Courtlandt Improvement Company and purchased roughly fifteen acres of farmland for their new subdivision, Courtlandt Place. A.J. Wise, a civil engineer, was retained to plat the property into twenty-six lots surrounding a wide boulevard with an impressive east entrance flanked by stone pillars and a tall brick wall enclosing the western end. As Courtlandt Place was then "out on the prairie," a more restrictive entrance was not required

In 1906, Houston was poised to become a great city. The construction of Houston's first skyscraper (eight stories) began; dredging commenced in the Turning Basin for the Houston Ship Channel; Carrie Nation paid the city a visit and inflicted \$750 damage on a saloon named after her, leaving no doubt that she wanted the name changed (it was); and Courtlandt Place was established on farmland and prairie on the outskirts of downtown Houston.

for this Private Place. A comment in "Key to the City of Houston," 1908, noted, "This suburb is located in a pleasant part of the City, beautifully drained, and all the space within the enclosure is paved completely. The residents enjoy all the modern improvements that are found in the City."

Houston was founded on commerce, and Courtlandt Place was intended for those best at it. Its founders were among Houston's first big businessmen, the heads of lumber companies, cotton factorages, law firms, brokerage houses and mercantile companies. This Old Guard with established fortunes and pedigrees considered themselves socially distinct from the oil wealth beginning to flow into Houston. Oil money, for the most part, was considered too raw and new but, of course, its heyday would come.



The first house on Courtland Place #6, completed 1910, built by Sanguinet and Staats for C.L. "Baron" Neuhaus.

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The premier residents of Courtlandt Place shared close business ties and were often members of the same families, imparting the feel of a family compound. The subdivision brought them closer together physically than had their baronial downtown estates which typically covered a half to an entire city block. The Carter family, lumber barons with vast holdings in East Texas, built four homes on the boulevard: Mrs. W.T. Carter, Sr. resided at # 14; her daughter Mrs. R.D. Randolph and her family also resided at # 14; W.T. Carter, Jr., resided at # 18; two other Carter daughters, Mrs. B.J. Carroll and Mrs. Judson Taylor resided at numbers 16 and 20 respectively. The owners of numbers 22 and 24,

attorney Murray B. Jones and Mrs. W.C. Hunt, were brother and sister; the first purchaser of both lots was Captain James Baker, Mrs. Jones' father. In the 1920s, J.M. Dorrance, who built and resided at # 9, purchased Sterling Meyer's home at # 4 for his daughter Mrs. Don Hall, and A.S. Cleveland, who built and resided at # 8, built # 10 for his daughter Mrs. W.A. Kirkland in the 1930s.

Business ties were equally prolific. J.M. Dorrance, a cotton factor, and his partner, E.L. Neville, built adjoining homes at numbers 9 and 11. Two other cotton factors, J.W. Garrow and A.S. Cleveland lived at numbers 19 and 8 respectively. Surprisingly, three oil men lived on Courtlandt

Place: James Autry of # 5 and Thomas J. Donoghue of # 17 were first general counsel and first vice president of the Texas Company respectively; Underwood Nazro of # 25 was vice president of Gulf Oil.

Property owners formed a voluntary association and served as trustees of the Courtlandt Improvement Company. The trustees regulated property transactions within the subdivision, the true intent of which was to screen prospective residents. Anyone "not up to snuff" found himself – and his checkbook - shut out. Marie McAshan in "A Houston Legacy" summarized the founders' intent: "They kept restrictions high as to family background, lot size, architecture, and above all, congeniality in philosophy and politics." <sup>2</sup> This informal control continued well into the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>



Digging the basement of # 6.



First stages of construction for #6. Note existing houses on Westheimer to the north.

The Roots
of Honston "The roots of Houston are in Courtlandt Place. From here, they spread all over town." 4 The homeowners of Courtlandt Place were instrumental in shaping the modern city. C.L. Neuhaus of # 6, known as "Baron," was a banker and founder of Neuhaus & Co.

A.S. Cleveland was president of the Chamber of Commerce, president of the Houston Red Cross, a trustee of Rice University, and served on the Houston School Board. W.T. Carter, Jr. was a city councilman, a commissioner for the Port of Houston and founder of Gibraltar Savings and Loan. The Carter family built an airport later purchased by the city (Hobby

Airport) and brought the

first air mail service to Houston. Frankie Carter Randolph (Mrs. R.D. Randolph) was a Democratic Party committee woman, a driving force behind the League of Women Voters, initiated the city manager concept for Houston and was one

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of the founders of the Junior League of Houston. William Kirkland was president of Houston's largest bank, First City National Bank. Dr. Judson Taylor, # 20, helped found a permanent blood bank for the Texas Gulf Coast area, served as president of both the Harris County and Texas medical societies and was a founder of the Dental Branch of the University of Texas. Don Hall built the Warwick Hotel.

Early Years
Life on Courtlandt Place was a rich pastiche of socially prominent, well-to-do people living in grand homes amid hordes of rowdy children, horses, ponies, cows, and chickens. Their lives were productive, but slowly paced by today's standards. Cooks, butlers, and maids were important members of the families and an influential element in daily life. In an interview with Sallie Gordon in the 1980s, the elderly Effie Hunt Heald, who lived all of her life in her parents' home at # 24, still remembered the names of the many domestic servants on the street and for whom

they worked. Parents took time to loll about with their children. and social interaction was a staple of the day. "The neighborhood was developed so the residents could share the experience of living with each other without the intrusion of outsiders....." Many of the homes had large galleries where much of the casual social activity centered. The sidewalks were wide for comfortable strolling...and a prescribed openness [was

maintained] in front of each house."5

Homes built on Courtlandt Place marked Houston's burgeoning awareness of an architectural sophistication beyond local and even Texas tradition. They were designed and built for very sophisticated people, most of whom had been educated in the East, summered in places like Newport and Saratoga Springs and had taken at least one "Grand Tour" of Europe. The architecture, loosely based on historical precedents - Classical, Mediterranean, Tudor, Georgian and Colonial - reflected the eclecticism characteristic of the American Beaux Arts movement. History was not replicated; historic detail was used to embellish houses that incorporated new (then) domestic technology, ample service space and modern (then) floor plans.

The architecture and craftsmanship that distinguished these homes a century ago made them irreplaceable. The finest local and national architects worked in Courtlandt Place, including Birdsall P. Briscoe, the grandson of Andrew Briscoe, a hero of San Jacinto, and the great-grandson of John R. Harris, founder of Harrisburg. Briscoe moved easily in the "Courtland Place set" and was able to garner commissions for six residences (11, 14, 18, 19, 20, 22) and remodel a seventh (16). Alfred C. Finn, the architect of the San Jacinto Monument, was responsible for numbers 5, 8 and 24; John Staub designed # 2; the Fort Worth firm of Sanguinet and Staats designed numbers 4, 6, 9 and 25; Carlos B. Schoeppl, famous for his Mediterranean houses in Florida, designed # 15; and the New York firm of Warren and Wetmore, best known for Grand Central Station, designed # 17.

Homes displayed exquisite millwork and paneling, builtin cabinetry, dramatic staircases, and exquisite glass, iron and tile work. In the era prior to electric or natural gas heating, huge basements to accommodate coal burning furnaces were a necessity, as were numerous fireplaces. "The household records of # 4 show that the gas company, not the electric company turned on the lights."6

Courtlandt Place children's tea party.

City Hall

In 1912, two historic events occurred which would prove crucial to the later survival of Courtlandt Place, particularly during the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s in Montrose. The ten trustees of the Courtlandt Association (formerly the Courtlandt Improvement Company) established six restrictive covenants to be carried in all Courtlandt Place deeds. Perhaps the most important was the first: "No

business house or houses, sanitarium, hospital, saloon, place of public entertainment, livery stable, resort or dance hall, or other place of business, shall ever be erected on said lot, or any part thereof."

Most significantly, and unlike neighboring Westmoreland Place and the more recent Montrose addition, Courtlandt Place's restrictive covenants were not limited to a fixed term. They were mandated in perpetuity, as long as they were enforced. The fortuitous ramifications of that clause, unique among Houston neighborhoods at the time, would become clear later in the century. An unpublished paper of the 1970s would affirm that "[The deed restrictions] are the single most important reason why Courtlandt Place has retained its original character and design." 8

The year 1912 also marked the first great challenge to Courtlandt Place's existence. The developer of Montrose, J.W. Link, a power-player at Houston city hall, wanted the

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brick wall enclosing the western boundary of Courtlandt Place removed and Courtlandt Place Boulevard, a private street, opened to through traffic from Lovett Boulevard. Link desired unobstructed access east along Lovett/Courtlandt Boulevard to downtown from his new subdivision – and, probably more to the point, his sprawling new mansion on Montrose Boulevard. Courtlandt Place was in his way. At Link's urging, the city sued to condemn the western end of Courtlandt Place

for "street purposes."9

A settlement was reached on November 27, 1912 whereby Courtlandt Place agreed to remove the west wall to allow a through flow of traffic. In exchange, the city was "to pave and maintain Courtlandt Boulevard and approaches thereto, install street lights at both ends of the Boulevard, and pass and enforce proper traffic ordinances protecting the Boulevard from heavy and objectionable traffic." With this clause, the city promised the residents of Courtlandt Place some essential protections for the decades to come.

A 1922 letter from Mr. Garrow, # 19, to Mr. Neuhaus, # 6, contained a copy of the settlement agreement and was discovered in the 1970s in the private papers of the Garrow family. "I am enclosing the original of the agreement entered into by

the City of Houston and the Courtlandt Owners at the time of the removal of the famous brick wall, because I think......this document should be in your possession."

Although the residents of Courtlandt Place were distressed over this incursion into their quiet neighborhood, effects were minimal until after World War II, when suburban flight would cause surrounding areas to deteriorate.



On the eve of World War I, fourteen homes on Courtlandt Place were occupied or under construction, and no further building commenced until after the war. Four more homes were constructed by 1937, completing the historical Courtlandt Place recognized today.

Between the wars, Courtlandt Place continued to set the standard for other developments and remained a focal point for social life in Houston. The Houston Country Club was founded in 1908, and despite the increasing popularity of country club entertaining, residents of Courtlandt Place cleaved to the old tradition of receiving guests at home. Their homes were designed for elegant soirees, with banquet-sized dining rooms and large reception halls. The Dorrances of # 9 dispensed with a formal living room altogether and entertained guests at legendary Sunday night suppers in their grandiose reception hall and dining room. In a 2007

interview, granddaughter Peggy Dorrance Powers recalled the dismay of *grand-père* Dorrance over her favorite game of hide-and-seek beneath the bear, lion and tiger-skin rugs, complete with heads, which carpeted the hall.<sup>10</sup>

The magazine La Revue described the Courtlandt Place scene in 1920: "Inside the great gates are homes of magnificent architecture and taste, symbolic of the artistic touch of wives of the owners... and present the theory that the home is a symbol of the character of its occupants." 11 An unreferenced newspaper clipping in the Garrow papers described the 1938 wedding at #19 of Gwendolyn Garrow to Palmer Hutcheson, Jr. The article was lavished with praise: "The evening ceremony was performed in the beautiful environment, with the glow of incandescents, like soft moonlight, illuminating

the great magnolia trees which bound the garden space, touching their creamy blossoms into deeper beauty....."

It wasn't all moonlight, magnolias and formal tea parties, however. Some of the Courtlandt Place families, as is true of many who are graced with great wealth and privilege, had a bit of "devil may care" lurking beneath their formal acknowledgement of social niceties. In a 2006 interview, Victor Carter II recalled that as a child, he and his siblings spent considerable time during the war with their grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. W.T. Carter, Jr. of # 18. Carter related that his grandmother had an interesting regimen for imposing order in what must have been a rather chaotic household: "To keep us grandchildren under control, my grandmother's butler was instructed to put rye whiskey in our milk after dinner. So I've been drinking since I was five. [The] butler finally told me about it – we got along real well." Carter also remembered that his aunt, Jessie Carter Taylor of # 20, became quite the bon vivant after her children



Miss Estelle Garrow, posed in wedding dress in front of fireplace at #19.

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were grown and hosted gambling and prize fights with boxers in her basement on Saturday nights. Carter recalled that a few Houston police officers were persuaded by relatives to pretend to raid the place one evening as a practical joke.

How surprised the residents of Courtlandt Place, wrapped within their idyllic enclave and sheltered by wealth and class, would have been to know, as World War II drew to a close, that even when peace returned, Courtlandt Place would never be the same and would soon fight its own war for survival.

Under Siege

After World War II and into the 1960s, the appeal of Houston's traditional neighborhoods diminished and population was lost to newer, more fashionable suburbs.

Courtlandt Place found itself increasingly under siege as the lovely old streets of Montrose became host to urban blight of the worst sort. "Who'd live down there?" was the conventional lament, "down there with the hippies, the trade traffic, and all those indescribably undesirables."<sup>12</sup>

Like rows of dominoes, the homes of more gracious times in Westmoreland Place and surrounding neighborhoods fell prey to the bulldozers for apartment complexes or were divided into rental units or simply abandoned

First group photo of Courtlandt Place residents, 1972, front porch of # 16.

and occupied by increasing numbers of vagrants. In a 2007 interview, Kirkland daughter Barbara Chiles ventured the opinion that the exceptional residences of Courtlandt Place, many still occupied by the original families or retained by them as high-end rental property, continued to command respect and admiration despite changing times.<sup>13</sup> The restrictive covenants carried on all Courtlandt Place deeds since 1912 were all that stood between the neighborhood and "redevelopment." "Many Houstonians thought it was just a matter of time before Courtlandt Place, too, would 'go commercial.' After all, the bulldozers were practically at the gates...." <sup>14</sup>

One resident stated in an interview, "People ask where I live, and I say, 'behind all the nude shows on Westheimer...' But what do I do when my six-year-old daughter is learning to read, and she spells out 'Boobie Rock' and 'Nude Girls' and wonders what it all means? I say, 'Oh, honey, it's just pretend.' And I get more determined that we will drive them out." 15

In 1969, the state of Texas inflicted what might have been the death-blow to Courtlandt Place. Freeway Spur 517 intruded into the east entrance, obliterating the park-like crescent that held some of the country's oldest cottonwood trees and the impressive stone pillars which gave notice that Courtlandt Place was special. Westmoreland Place, already on life-support, was decimated with a third or more of its original area lost beneath or marooned behind an elevated

expanse of concrete and steel. The freeway's desecration deepened residents' despair for the future. In a 2006 interview, Glenn Smith, a resident of # 4, stated, "When I bought my house in 1969, Courtlandt Place was full of little old ladies in neglected houses waiting to die. My friends referred to my house as 'Glenn's Folly'." 16

> A Glimmer of Hope

The 1970s and 1980s brought a surge of interest in older houses and historic preservation fueled by Baby Boomers seeking to

escape the sterility of suburbia. Some Courtlandt Place residents began to consider alternatives for the preservation of their now historic neighborhood. Closure of the street at Taft was the only solution to the continuously corrosive spillover from lower Westheimer and residents envisioned re-erecting the west wall. An unprecedented and extremely bold move was required to restore the founders' original Private Place intent: repurchasing the street from the city.

The 1912 settlement between Courtlandt Place and the city "to enforce proper traffic ordinances protecting Courtlandt Place Boulevard from heavy and <u>objectionable</u> traffic" was the key to obtaining the city's agreement. However, that settlement was never recorded and was discovered purely

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by chance in the 1970s by Courtlandt Place resident Pierre (Pete) Schlumberger. Rescued by Schlumberger from a box labeled "Old Papers" in the City Secretary's office, it proved to be the second crucial document, after the restrictive covenants, in the survival of Courtlandt Place.

Fearful of setting a dangerous precedent for street privatization, the city stipulated a National Register of Historic Places designation for Courtlandt Place as a condition of the sale. Pierre Schlumberger spent the better part of a year assembling what was needed to apply for the National Register. Scion of a wealthy international oil-

emotions were so extreme that the project was abandoned for four years while residents warred over the issue.

Resolution and Resolve

In 1980, Courtlandt Place was finally listed in the National Register of Historic Places, a remarkable feat given the initial contention. Equally remarkable, in 1982 each resident paid their share of \$103,115 to purchase the street from the city. Courtlandt Place rebuilt the western wall and again enjoyed security on its western boundary - a stunning victory.<sup>17</sup> After many years, children played and neighbors socialized



Number 17 was built for Thomas. J. Donoghue, first vice president of the Texas Company, and designed by the New York firm of Warren and Wetmore, best known for their design for Grand Central Station.

industry clan and an attorney by training, Schlumberger was able devote his time, skill and considerable resources to the project and assumed a leadership role in the neighborhood. His social position gave him entrée to the original owners and their families to gather information, and his attorney's skill was of inestimable value in deed and land research. Schlumberger underwrote the costs of preparation of materials needed for application to the National Register which included the services of a professional architectural historian and copies of the Carter family's irreplaceable collection of early Courtlandt Place photographs.

The application process for historic designation began in 1976 but was immediately engulfed in controversy. Some residents believed, erroneously, that enrollment in the National Register of Historic Places would curtail their property rights or even leave them vulnerable to forced entry from busloads of tourists. Despite the valiant attempts of Schlumberger and others to inject reason into the debate,

on the street and Courtlandt Place gathered increased recognition as one of Houston's most historic landmarks.

The National Register designation and replacement of the west wall were important first steps toward preservation, but two critical challenges still loomed for Courtlandt Place: (1) the east entrance remained vulnerable to undesirable and unwanted foot and vehicular traffic; (2) funding for the maintenance of the common areas and the now privately owned street was difficult and unpredictable as civic association dues were voluntary under the still-operative 1912 by-laws.

Over the ensuing eleven years, Courtlandt Place residents struggled to address and resolve these issues. In 1988, the east wall and gates were erected. In 1992, a stronger civic association was formed which incorporated the original restrictive covenants and

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expanded the by-laws to include perpetual membership and mandatory payment of association dues.

of underdeveloped farmland, Courtlandt Place today has regained its ancestral rhythms. The demographics have changed, and residents are no longer extended families or business associates, but those who live there respond to the design of their neighborhood in ways the architects and planners intended 100 years ago. A difference in 2008 may be that these neighbors are conscious of the responsibility they

hold as caretakers of one of Houston's greatest architectural treasures. None of Courtlandt Place's original 18 homes has been demolished – a unique distinction among the nation's Private Place neighborhoods. The neighborhood's three modern structures were built on vacant lots.

Courtlandt Place provides us with a unique opportunity to observe busy people with careers and families successfully living in and caring for important historic homes. It is affirmation that preserving historic structures and neighborhoods enriches both the present and future quality of life for everyone in Houston. ★



PHOTO BY SUSAN ZARATE

Perhaps the iconic image of Courtlandt Place, #5 was designed by Alfred C. Finn for James L. Autry, first general counsel of the Texas Company.

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." (William Faulhner, 1897 g 1962, Requiem for a Nun

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