

William Stamps Farish Quadrangle at St. John's School

The William Stamps Farish Quadrangle, or by its familiar name "The Quadrangle," was the first building on the original five and a half-acre site of St. John's School. Since its establishment, the St. John's campus has expanded to twenty-eight acres. In June 2004, a two and half year, \$25 million construction project got underway at the school. A combination of both new building and renovation of existing structures, the project represents the largest in the school's history. One phase of the development includes demolishing three sides of the Quadrangle and reconstructing it to meet contemporary disability codes and upgrade electrical wiring for new technology. The intention is that a fully functioning Quadrangle, rebuilt in the same Austin limestone, will allow larger classrooms and enhanced educational facilities designed to better serve students and teachers.

Originally designed by Houston architect Hiram A. Salisbury, the Quadrangle, the school's main building, was built around a central courtyard bordered by cloistered walkways. In keeping with the quality of Eastern U.S. college preparatory schools, St. John's represented the efforts of several prominent local citizens to create "a school of exacting standards" for Houston students, so that they could go on to attend demanding universities.¹

The "Master Plan for the Development of St. John's School," written in the early 1950s, states the school's founding objectives:

St. John's School was established in 1946 as an independent school sponsored jointly by the Parish of St. John the Divine Episcopal Church and by a group of citizens who recognized the

vital importance of good educational facilities to the community of Houston. The school was founded by a Board of Trustees representing various religious preferences and was incorporated as a non-profit institution under the laws of the State of Texas. It is a school which welcomes students of all denominations as a strength in its pursuit of Christian ideals.

well as Houston's need for improved schools as a way to attract families to the city after the war, St. John's School was founded and the Quadrangle was built.

For five years, Ellen Clayton Garwood, a prominent Houstonian whose husband, W. St. John Garwood, became Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Texas and whose father, Will Clayton, was president of the Anderson Clayton Cotton

Company and undersecretary of state for foreign affairs prior to World War II, had considered the idea that the city needed a new college preparatory school with the highest of standards. Because the options were scarce in Houston, many parents who preferred this quality of education for their children sent them to independent boarding schools in other states. In December 1945, Mrs. Garwood and Reverend Thomas Sumners of the Church of St. John the Divine invited Alan Lake Chidsey to Houston to help establish St. John's School. Chidsey was appointed founding headmaster of St. John's at the school's first organizational

meeting on January 4, 1946.

By January 27, a founding board of trustees was in place, the school was named St. John's School, the official seal of corporation was adopted, and the chairman of the board was authorized to negotiate purchase of the proposed site property. On February 5, 1946, Mr. James O. Winston, the chairman of the founding board of trustees, a group known as "Founders," received approval to secure bids based on building plans submitted by architect Hiram A. Salisbury. Also in February, Mrs. William Stamps Farish, Sr. made the school's first sizable donation. The Founders used the funds toward construction costs of the



Students on the west lawn, c. 1950s.

Courtesy St. John's School

By the end of World War II, the great demand for petroleum products brought Texas and Houston into the national spotlight. Very few building projects happened during the war, but afterwards the city was booming and the downtown skyline was under rapid construction. With this new expansion came an increase in Houston's population and, as a result, a demand for higher caliber educational opportunity, a feature that the city lacked. In 1945, only one independent school existed in Houston: The Kinkaid School. It was a relatively small school, unable to handle an influx of students and still function efficiently. For this reason, as

first building wing, West Farish, named as a memorial to her son, Williams Stamps Farish, Jr., who died in World War II combat. Later in the year, a second gift from Mrs. Farish, in memory of her husband, made possible the addition of the East Farish wing (the original Arts and Sciences Building) and completed the Quadrangle. This endowment formed the nucleus of the physical plant at St. John's School.

In early March 1946, oil magnate Hugh Roy Cullen and his family donated the five and half acres for the school and the building contract gained approval. Cullen had originally bought the land with the intention of erecting an oil company building on it, but the land had real estate deed restrictions set by the River Oaks Corporation.

Also at this time, the board of

trustees entered into a joint operating contract with the neighboring St. John the Divine Episcopal Church to govern the use of mutual facilities. Although physically connected, the church and school have never had an administrative association. Construction of the Quadrangle commenced in late March 1946. Beginning June 13, 1946, progress on the building was stalled for seventy-seven days when a city-wide builders' strike occurred. The Houston Building Trades Council picketed work on construction jobs to force general contractors to require all common laborers and truck drivers to join unions, under penalty of losing employment status for failing to comply. Contractors refused to sign the building trades agreement and shut down all development projects in Houston.

Finally, a compromise was reached

and construction of the school resumed on August 30, 1946. After the strike ended, it was heralded as the most paralyzing labor-management dispute in the history of Houston, stalling all commercial construction amounting to more than \$50,000,000 in projects.² Despite construction being behind schedule, St. John's opened for classes as planned on September 27, 1946. The 310 enrolled students were shuffled between various locations, including nearby churches and business offices, as well as a temporary building ("Hoodwink Hall") erected by the school's engineer, Walter Hood, and two other craftsmen.

The original building plans had ten apartments on the second floor of West Farish to accommodate the school's first faculty members. When the school was founded, the newly hired teachers lived

Salon Juárez

Between 1910 and the Great Depression, Houston's Mexican American population became a truly viable urban community, called "*la colonia*." In response to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution and attracted by new economic developments in Houston during these years, large numbers of people of Mexican descent came to make a new life in Houston. This period of influx resulted in the expansion of small, developing Hispanic neighborhoods, known as *barrios*, the term for Spanish-speaking quarters in U.S. urban areas.¹ By 1930, Magnolia Park in Houston's east end was the city's largest *barrio*.

These new Houstonians often found it difficult to adjust to the new American culture that surrounded them. Many were looked down upon for not being able to speak English and were considered uneducated. As a result, they felt they needed support from one another. One of the most effective ways in which they were able to provide such support was through the creation of cooperative and protective service organizations.² Mutual aid societies, or *sociedades mutualistas*, provided Mexican Americans with crucial financial and emotional support, a sense of common experience and Mexican identity, and a cultural frame of reference for them in public life. Their fundamental concern was to help each other survive the very difficult conditions under which they lived and worked.³

In May 1919, sixteen Mexican Americans met in Magnolia Park and founded one of the first mutual aid associations, Sociedad Mutualista Mexicana Benito Juárez. In 1928, men from the society, which offered its members life insurance and a social outlet, built a two-story, forty-eight by eighty foot meeting hall, or *salon*, at 7320 Navigation Boulevard. This prominent community building, Salon Juárez, became "a beacon with a welcome mat,"⁴ a place where Mexican Americans, who were discriminated from many local businesses and services, could come to dance, watch movies, see plays, celebrate special occasions, attend school where

Spanish was allowed to be spoken, buy groceries, and simply gather with other Mexican Americans outside of a church setting.⁵ Salon Juárez, according to architectural historian Stephen Fox, was the first purpose-built, nonreligious public institution constructed by and for the local Mexican American community.⁶ Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez sought members from all over the city and, spurred by the construction of Salon Juárez at the end of the 1920s, helped to make the Magnolia Park neighborhood into Houston's hub of Mexican culture.

At the same time, however, the Great Depression was beginning. At least two thousand Mexican Houstonians, approximately fifteen percent of the *colonia's* population in 1930, left during the Depression; the era's economic hardship worsened the degree of already existing poverty in their communities. Members of the Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez could not pay their dues to meet expenses, so in 1932, they had to relinquish management of the *salon* they had so proudly dedicated only four years earlier. At some point after the mutualistas lost the hall, probably in the 1940s or 50s, the surrounding community began referring to the *salon* as Magnolia Hall. Over the years, the hall was rented to groups and organizations for various purposes, including many of its original uses, such as a place where dances were held, entertainers performed, and where the community gathered for special events.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, maintenance of the *salon* switched hands several times. During this evolution of ownership, the *salon's* roof was removed with the intention of replacing it, but the project was never completed. Lacking a roof, the building started to deteriorate. Now Salon Juárez is on the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance's "Endangered Buildings" list, appraised at \$83,790. The *salon* was recently a subject of local news, when it was determined by the city as a hazard and was scheduled to go on the auction block on July 6, 2004, for failure to pay back taxes of nearly \$20,000. Just days before the land was to be auctioned, the owner

out-of-state. To guarantee these employees' jobs in a booming city where housing was scarce, St. John's provided on-campus residences for them. Beginning in 1952, after Houston built more residential areas to accommodate the growing postwar population, the faculty living in the Quadrangle apartments found suitable homes off-campus and the apartments were converted to classrooms and administrative offices.

Faculty and students gradually occupied the new building throughout the first school year, teaching and attending classes amid noises of beating hammers and buzzing saws. Full use of the building began in early 1948, when construction of the entire Quadrangle was finally complete. The dedication ceremony for the new school was held in the courtyard on April 10, 1948.

In the fall of 2004, former St. John's School board member Deborah Detering contacted historic preservation instructor Jim Arnold at University of Houston's School of Architecture to propose a documentation project for his 2005 spring semester class. St. John's still held architectural drawings from the building's original construction in the 40s, but the Quadrangle had not been fully documented again since changes were made over the years. For Detering, who sent three children to the school and is an alum herself, St. John's is a meaningful piece of her personal history and she did not want to risk losing the history of its original structure.

Arnold's Spring 2005 historic preservation class began the drawing and historical research process, and, as three sides of the Quadrangle were gradually

torn down for new construction, his Spring 2006 students carried on the project. Although the exterior design of the new building is sympathetic to old construction, much of the original materials and limestone patterns cannot be repeated. As renovations and rebuilding continue, Detering meets with a building committee once a week to attempt to retain historically significant features of the Quadrangle. It is a hard fought battle, but Detering has made it a goal to preserve as much of St. John's history as possible. Despite its new walls, the most crucial element is that the school embodies the historic spirit that spurred on its growth and prosperity for nearly sixty years. ♦

—Leigh Cutler

paid the taxes owed to the county and the *salon* was removed from the list of properties to be sold.⁷

By just driving down Navigation Boulevard, past Salon Juárez, and through the immediate surrounding neighborhood, it would appear that renovating the hall would not serve much benefit to the area since the residential pockets nearby are so impoverished. The question arises of whether an improved building will remain in good shape if the currently poor conditions of the neighborhood persist. In order to answer this question, it is important to explore existing plans for the future of the community while continuing to consider its past.

In 1998, the Houston Planning and Development Department published an economic development plan for the East End area with strategies to revitalize the community. The issue of rebuilding the East End's economy came from the decline in the area, economically and socially, as a result of the 1980s oil bust in Houston. The city collaborated with the East End Chamber of Commerce on an analysis of the underlying factors inhibiting a full recovery of the East End's economy. As a result of this research, the Greater East End Management District was formed in 1999 to promote economic development, improve infrastructure and amenities, provide services to commercial property owners, and create opportunities for workforce training and development. With five years of tangible accomplishments in that area of Houston, the management district designed a Ten-Year Service Plan, anticipated to run until 2014. The district is making progress toward changing public perception of the East End as rundown, unsafe, and unappealing for business or as a destination.⁸

Although only islands of stability exist in Magnolia Park today, such as the YWCA and Community Family Center, plans are in the works to uplift that community and transform it into an enduring, secure environment. With a vision, mission, and

objectives already in place for the neighborhood where Salon Juárez is located, a renovated version of the building could become a contributing catalyst for revitalization.

Salon Juárez represents the strong potential for architecture and landscape to be primary sources for understanding the past. Preservation of Salon Juárez, a place that brought together people of the Houston Mexican community, represents a project in true following with Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez's motto, "Unión y Progreso," or unity and progress. Perhaps these two words can inspire community leaders, activists, historians, preservationists, and other interested Houstonians to unite and make further progress toward saving the first, and now one of the last, historic landmarks to the city's Hispanic heritage. ♦

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Salon Juárez as it looked in the fall of 2004.