

Local Historic District

Association with Individuals of Historical Importance

Ebony Acres Neighborhood Supporting Documents

Alexander's House, 1190 E. M. Franklin Avenue

Mr. Titus Alexander was the owner of this house in the Ebony Acres neighborhood. The earliest documentation for this house is dated 1957. No building permit was found in City of Austin records for this home. A record of water service connection in 1957 was found. It was built by Clarence Flournoy, a well-known East Austin builder, who was responsible for the construction of most of the houses in the subdivision.

Mr. Alexander is a veteran. He served our country and was stationed at Tuskegee, Alabama, site of the famous Tuskegee airmen.

It is conjectured by some that the Ebony Acres subdivision was created in the late 1940s in anticipation of the post WWII housing boom, fueled by returning veterans. What occurred for African-American veterans, such as Mr. Alexander, was that they found out that the benefits of the federal GI Bill were not equally extended to all. Since the GI Bill programs were administered locally, they were subject to local prejudices and limitations of judgement with regards to race. This meant that local banks would not lend for homes in black neighborhoods. It is perhaps for this reason that veterans, such as Mr. Alexander, instead bought homes in developer financed subdivisions specifically categorized for blacks such as Ebony Acres.

In any case, Mr. Alexander was my neighbor and we became acquainted, as neighbors do, over the back fence between our yards.

Over the years, Mr. Alexander acquired other houses he used as rental properties. The house at 1190 E. M. Franklin Avenue (the Alexander house) though came to be closely associated with the Alexander name. The Alexanders are a well-known family in East Austin. Mr. Alexander's nephew, for example, is Hoover Alexander, owner of the well-known eatery, Hoover's on Manor Road.

What I learned is that Mr. Alexander was employed following his military service as a porter at a West Austin Church. After retiring from the church, he was able to dedicate himself even more fully to his hobby and passion, which was raising and training prize greyhounds. He fenced off and used the back part of the property at 1190 E. M. Franklin Avenue where he kept and trained racing dogs from the local area as well as from as far away as Florida. Some of the dogs raced at Manor Downs. Several of the dogs were champions.

Perhaps the most significant historical association of the Alexander house at 1190 E. M. Franklin Avenue is also the least known. Through my conversations with Mr. Alexander and in visiting him, I learned of the connection between the Alexanders of East Austin and the famous Bremond family of near West

Austin. The family of the Bremond Block fame and the Alexander family of Ebony Acres are related by kinship.

The story I was told is that Mr. Alexander's family lived and farmed on land between Pilot Knob and Manchaca. This was also the area in which the Bremond and associated families had extensive landholdings. At some point in time, these two families became intertwined through a secret relationship from which a child was born. I do not recall exactly, but it may have been Mr. Alexander's grandmother. Of course, under the regime of strict segregation of races, these familial ties could never be revealed and in fact were hidden for several generations. Formal recognition of ties between the two families would have to wait.

It was only much later in Mr. Alexander's life that he was acknowledged as having kinship (through his grandmother?) to the celebrated Bremond family. I have seen a photograph of Mr. Alexander standing with his fellow (white) ancestors at an intersection of either 7th or 8th St. and Congress Avenue during a commemoration of Bremond family history. I believe it to be near where the Bremond family's bank had been located. The city had done one of the typical streets renaming for a day commemorative events. I am not sure of the year, but it seems it was during the '90s.

Seeing Mr. Alexander surrounded by his smiling white relatives, was a poignant reminder of that very different time in our history when mixing of the races was not only completely taboo, but likely illegal. It was also simultaneously widely practiced and hidden.

It is this history that lays hidden, waiting to be fully explored in the houses of Ebony Acres. These same houses now threatened with demolition.

These houses stand as material embodiments of the ineffable. The history that has yet to be spoken out loud is waiting to be recorded. It is present in their beams and timbers. These houses stand as monuments to the indefatigable spirit that animated Mr. Alexander towards his more rightful place in his family history. With historic preservation, that same spirit can elevate his family name in the history of our city.

This brief essay is meant to be suggestive only. Consider it as bits and scraps of memories shared by neighbors in an evolving community. Yet it also represents the underlying, unwritten history of a place called Ebony Acres. It is impossible to record the history of a neighborhood in this small space. I offer these ends of threads of stories so that they may be grasped. From these few threads I hope a more complete fabric of history may be woven.

While visiting Mr. Alexander one day, he showed me a copy of a book about the Bremond family history (the title escapes me). Maybe his picture was in the book, I don't remember. What I do remember is the manner in which he wryly suggested that the previously hidden and tardily acknowledged link between the two families afforded little material benefit at this stage in his life beyond the book itself.

I did catch a glimmer in his tone, of a different benefit, perhaps – more restorative, one might say even therapeutic– of this history revealed. Perhaps a slight balm to the indignities suffered by so many in our society on account of their race.

My neighbor, Mr. Alexander, was forced to give up his greyhounds. He did so very unwillingly. I lost my neighbor. It was a heavy blow for him to see his dogs taken away from the property at 1190 E. M. Franklin Avenue. After that, he rarely came by. Later that year, Alexander sold the house to the current owner – the owner who now seeks to have it demolished.

Mr. Alexander’s house is identical in many aspects to my own home at 1192 E. M. Franklin Avenue. The same builder, the same floorplan - the design and construction are the same. For this reason I know that with a modicum of care, Alexander’s house can continue to serve as shelter for future inhabitants of this neighborhood.

With historic preservation it can continue to serve as a monument in the history of Ebony Acres.

By its association with the Alexander family and their connection to the Bremond family it deserves to be protected from demolition so that the full history of Ebony Acres might be recorded for future generations.

Respectfully submitted,

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L. D. Davis Home 3601 Grant St. and the Carrington House 3607 Grant St.

Mr. and Mrs. L. D. Davis were the owners of the house at 3601 Grant St. in the Ebony Acres neighborhood. The building permit on file with the City of Austin shows that it was built in 1961 by Clarence Flournoy, a well-known East Austin builder. Mr. Flournoy was responsible for building most of the houses in Ebony Acres. City records further show that in 1970 the Davis house had an addition built on and a detached garage.

I got to know Mr. and Mrs. Davis when I bought my home in Ebony Acres and moved into 1192 E. M. Franklin Avenue. The way the neighborhood is laid out, the Davises were the second house down from me – E. M. Franklin ends next door to me with Alexanders house at 1190 E. M. Franklin and then Grant St. begins with the next residence. The Davis house is the first street on Grant Street and sits at the top of the hill we all live on. I can easily see the front of the Davis home from my front porch.

Of course, everyone called him L. D. Mrs. Davis was known by all as Pearlie, her given name. The first time I remember meeting them was one day when I was working in my front yard. I had grown a bunch of tulips in the yard that spring. L. D. and Pearlie drove by in their big cream, yellow Continental. They stopped in the street and called out hello. They welcomed me to the neighborhood. L. D. asked why my soil was so dark and rich while his was so rocky. They admired the flowers.

Later on, I found out that when talking to people on the East Side, I could easily let them know where I lived by mentioning L. D. Davis. It seemed like everyone knew who he was. They would say, "Oh, you live down the street from L. D. Davis? I know where that is." I quickly learned I was neighbors with a local "celebrity".

L. D. Davis is best known as the owner and proprietor of the White Swan Lounge on East 12th Street. L. D. achieved a remarkable level of success in the business world, both in the entertainment and real estate fields. What I later learned was that this was not due merely to good fortune, but rather to very determined effort on his part in overcoming extreme barriers of racial prejudice and personal circumstances of childhood poverty and lack of education.

Mr. Davis was reputed to have only gone as far as the third grade. In conversation with Mrs. Davis she remarked that he had come a very far way from Pflugerville with his third grade education. I'm not sure if she meant he was from Pflugerville or if she was, but I understood how much that underscored the magnitude of his achievements. By some he was given the title of "the King of East 12th Street" for his ownership of the White Swan Lounge and other ventures along that principal East Austin corridor.

Sadly, L. D. died shortly after we became neighbors in 2003. Mrs. Davis (Pearlie) and I became better acquainted as the years passed. She recounted to me the stories of struggle and success in their lives on Grant Street in Ebony Acres.

One would be forced to acknowledge that it is a remarkable feat for a man of L. D. Davis' humble background to arrive at a position to be the owner of a well-known entertainment venue like the White Swan Lounge on East 12th St. Even more amazing is that through his determination and effort, Mr. Davis was able to purchase the home at 3601 Grant in 1961.

Homeownership is one of the foremost mechanisms for acquiring and maintaining wealth in the US. It was out of reach for many of L. D. Davis' generation, yet he went far beyond that. He later expanded on the family home at 3601 Grant to accommodate his large family. Mrs. Davis had children from a previous marriage who also lived in family home.

Additionally, in 1961, L. D. Davis facilitated the purchase of the house at 3607 Grant, the Carrington House, which is at the end of the cul-de-sac at the base of the hill. In an example of extended family neighborhood building, this house was owned by Mr. Floyd Carrington, the brother of Mrs. Davis. In her later years, Pearlie Davis would go to live with her nephew, Reverend Dwight Carrington of Elgin, Texas who grew up in the house at 3607 Grant. He was Pearlie's nephew and helped care for her at the end of her life after she had left the Ebony Acre neighborhood.

Between the Davis home at 3601 Grant and the Carrington house at 3607 are two more dwellings which were both occupied by extended family members. The house at 3603 Grant was home to Pearlie's grandmother. She was affectionately called Mama Lula. Next door, going down the hill, was 3605 Grant St. which was home to Pearlie's mother. She was known as Annie. In the neighborhood she is still remembered by some for her striking appearance and solid white head of hair.

Mrs. Davis sold the house at 3601 Grant to the current owner who now seeks to demolish it. The Davis house has survived many storms and trials. We hope that it can survive the onslaught of predatory development. I would ask that any permit to demolish this house be denied.

The historic significance of the L. D. Davis home and the Carrington house is best appreciated when placed in the context of the life and circumstances of Mr. Davis and the time in which he lived. The fact of achieving homeownership, not only for himself but for his extended family, is an accomplishment of great importance.

He succeeded in acquiring wealth, in the form of homeownership, and through his business ventures. This was accomplished during a time when African-Americans were prohibited by law and by private covenants from owning property or residing in many areas of Austin. The fact that Ebony Acres was established as a subdivision; was developed and built as place specifically to attract African-Americans coincided remarkably with Mr. Davis' ability to rise above the limitations of birth and circumstance. Ebony Acres provided Mr. Davis a venue where he could use his unique talents to create wealth in homeownership for himself and his descendants.

There is much more to be learned about the story of L. D. and Pearlie Davis and their extended family. I know only the little I share here with you. For example, one of the daughters married the brother of football great Earl Campbell. They live in East Austin to this day.

The developer financing method used in Ebony Acres represented a work around solution to the housing crisis experienced by many, both black and white in post-WWII America. Like most problems, this was experienced most acutely by those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. The benefits afforded by bank loans, mortgages and other more traditional types of home financing were not available to most African-Americans, either because of their income, neighborhood location or simply because of their race.

The promise of the federal GI Bill, offering benefits for education and housing, were administered at the local level. This meant that they were subject to the same local barriers of racial discrimination and laws of segregation that hindered most black citizens at every step of their lives. The developer/financing/sales contract model as shown in the contracts of sale for homes in Ebony Acres, offered a means of financing to achieve homeownership. These contract sales often came at heightened risk of foreclosure and eviction. They also often carried higher rates of interest, penalties and fewer buyer protections.

When Ebony Acres was first opened for building there was a big sign over the street entrance. It was Redwood Street at that time. The sign had two words "EBONY ACRES" thus proclaiming to the world that African-American people were welcome down that dirt road. It mattered little that the road led into what was once a dump. African-American people were welcome to enter and if they could somehow manage, they were welcome to build a home and raise a family.

African-Americans at this time in American history could be characterized as a marginalized group. They were prohibited from living in many parts of Austin. Others were forced by changing times from smaller towns towards the big cities. They were told they were not welcome in many places. But in Ebony Acres they were welcome. Ebony Acres was a place where a marginalized group of people were offered a piece of marginal land. It was in fact a flood-prone, former dump. They were challenged to make this their home. And they succeeded remarkably well.

Men and women like Mr. and Mrs. Davis, Mr. Alexander or disabled veteran, Mr. Bill Hancock at 3605 Grant – they all met the challenge and overcame it. They succeeded. They seized the opportunity of dubious quality offered to them. They took the chance given. They struggled and they created homes for themselves and their families in a place called Ebony Acres.

L. D. Davis' home at 3601 Grant and the Carrington House at 3607 Grant represent the victory these people achieved. The homes they made represent the history and are their legacy. The victory they won is what endures in these houses now being threatened with demolition. They deserve to be preserved. I ask that you not allow these houses and the dream they memorialize to be destroyed.

Respectfully submitted by Danny Fowler 1192 E. M. Franklin Ave. Austin TX 78721