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October 29, 2020

VIA EMAIL

Mr. Steve Sadowsky  
Historic Preservation Officer  
City of Austin  
[Steve.sadowsky@austintexas.gov](mailto:Steve.sadowsky@austintexas.gov)

Re: Proposed Demolition of Building at 416 W. 12<sup>th</sup> Street

Dear Mr. Sadowsky:

The purpose of this letter is to express our concerns and opposition to the proposed demolition and replacement of the building at 416 W. 12<sup>th</sup> Street. We are the owners of the A.O. Watson House located at 402 W. 12<sup>th</sup> Street, immediately adjacent to the proposed demolition site.

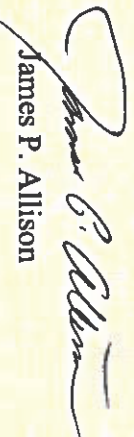
We have been honored to preserve the A.O. Watson House for over 20 years. Constructed in 1894 by famed public architect A.O. Watson as his personal residence, this post-Victorian structure is a valuable part of the City of Austin Historic Preservation Program. The demolition of the adjacent building would pose a significant threat to the integrity of our structure and historical landscaping.

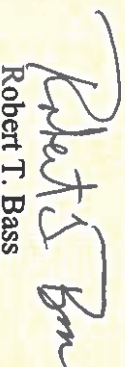
There are several heritage trees on our property with canopies extending over the adjacent property. Some of the trees on our property were obtained by Mr. Watson's son, Brig. Gen. A.P. Watson, from the National Mall in Washington D.C. during his tenure with what was then called the War Department, and are believed to be well over one hundred years old. Gen. Watson served on Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing's staff in WWI, and on Gen. Douglas MacArthur's staff in WWII. Demolition of the adjacent property and construction of a thirty-story building will likely destroy these trees and completely alter the historic integrity of our property. I am attaching a brief history of this historic Austin landmark for your further information.

The A.O. Watson House has a brick masonry foundation with a full basement. The proposed demolition and construction project will also create a significant risk of structural damage to our building.

We urge that the City of Austin deny the demolition permit at 416 W. 12<sup>th</sup> Street. Please let us know if we can provide further information.

Sincerely,

  
James P. Allison

  
Robert T. Bass

cc: Members, Architectural Review Committee  
Historical Landmark Commission

## A.O. WATSON HOUSE

Flying over Central Texas, the history of the earth is laid out in front of you like a giant salt map. The rivers that sculpt the land serve as a guidebook for inquiry into the area's geologic past. Buildings, like rivers, provide those who appreciate their history a view into a different time and place. A narrative is created, not only of the boards and nails that frame the structure, but of epic proportions---spanning generations and encompassing the full range of human realities.

And it is here in Central Texas where our story begins.

Arthur Osborn (A.O) Watson was born in Washington County, son of Scottish immigrants on March 10, 1864. Educated in local school houses, Watson went on to study architecture at the recently-opened Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1881. Opened a few short years before, in 1876, Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College, presently Texas A&M University in College Station, was the only public university in the state, permitting A.O. Watson to be one of the first homegrown, classically-trained architects in Texas.

After his graduation in 1884, Watson moved from the 'deep soils' of the Brazos River Valley to the rolling hills and natural springs of Austin. Like towns all over the old frontier, the railroad had brought heterogeneity and wealth to Austin in the 1870s. But it was the newly appointed role of permanent state capitol and oil industry in the 1882 that launched the city into a period of intensive growth. The University of Texas was founded in 1883; St. Edward's University followed shortly thereafter in 1885. The Capitol building, publicized as the seventh largest building in the world at the time, was completed in 1888. With the installment of these landmarks and key institutions, the enduring identity of Austin as an education and political hub was intact.

When looking at these structures, a similar style runs through all. The Victorian Era in architecture popular during this time included styles such as Gothic Revival, Second Empire, Queen Ann, and Richardsonian Romanesque, which all shared asymmetrical plans, a variety of materials, intricate detailing and cross-circulation patterns. Like Westminster Abbey in London, the buildings erected in Texas in this era were created to project a feeling of state and local pride in the people, as well as to designate a community center.

After the Texas Legislature authorized bonds for the construction of new municipal buildings in 1881, architects from all over the state began to compete for the chance to have their designs put in stone. A.O. Watson was no different. Stating with the Val Verde County Courthouse in 1887, Watson and partner Jacob Larmour began a fabulous run of projects that took them across the state. The following list documents the buildings constructed from their designs from the 1880s to the early 1900s.

Title of Building	Year of Completion	Style of Building
Val Verde County Courthouse	1887	Second Empire, Classical Revival
Comanche County Courthouse	1890	Renaissance Revival
Badu House (Private House)	1891	Renaissance Revival
Grimes County Courthouse	1891	Italianate
Llano County Courthouse	1892	Romanesque Revival, Italianate
Haskell County Courthouse	1892	Renaissance Revival
Cumberland Presbyterian Church (Austin)	1892	
Milam County Courthouse	1893	Renaissance Revival, Romanesque
Taylor National Bank (Williamson County)	1894	Renaissance Revival, Romanesque
Waller County Courthouse	1894	Romanesque Revival
Gohmert-Summers House (Private Home in DeWitt County)	1895	Victoria, Italianate
Hopkins County Courthouse	1895	Richardsonian, Romanesque
Caswell House (Austin, West St. and 15 <sup>th</sup> St.) (Still in use)	1895	Victorian, Colonial Revival
DeWitt County Courthouse	1896	Romanesque Revival
Southwestern Telegraph and Telephone Building (Austin)	1899	Romanesque
All Saints Episcopal Church (Austin, 27 <sup>th</sup> St. and Whittis) (still in use)	1899	Gothic Revival
Austin High School (Austin, 9 <sup>th</sup> St. and Trinity)	1900	Classical Revival
State Lunatic Asylum (Austin)	1904	Classical Revival
Christ Episcopal Church of Temple	1904	Gothic Revival
Confederate Woman's Home (Austin, Cedar St. and (still in use)	1908	
Bartlett Grammar School (Bell/Williamson County)	1909	
Alpine Grammar School (Brewster County)	1910	

Taken as a group, this list shows just how prolific and influential A.O. Watson was during his career. Each within the mode of popular styles of the time, these buildings are beautiful examples of architecture that have endured over a century, save the common fires that destroyed many of these structures. Unlike the more modern buildings designed after the turn of the century, the Victorian Era of architecture in this state produced grand structures that seem important, strong, and elegant. They are photographed and displayed proudly by the counties and cities that host them and by the people that admire them.

By the time A.O. Watson married Miss Minnie Pope of Austin in 1893, he was a very successful and prominent architect. Mrs. Watson came from one of the early and well-respected families of Austin. Together, it was only fitting that they reside in one of the most elegant homes in the downtown area. The A.O. Watson House, built in 1894, exhibits many elements of the styles Watson used in all of his designs. Composed of wood, the exterior exhibits much of the fine detail and use of arches that define the Victorian Era. Inside, ornate fireplaces and woodworking give the house a unique touch.

In a stroke of luck and good connections, this writer had the opportunity to meet Mr. John Watson, grandson of A.O. Watson, while attending the University of Texas at Austin in 2007. Prior to that meeting, this author spent many hours researching A.O. Watson and his family home in libraries, the Austin History Center, and the internet, with little result. From the second that John Watson walked familiarly through the front doors, however, anecdotes and memories spilled from his lips like no book or archival document could. As he walked from room to room, Mr. Watson drew attention to details never noticed or now hidden. A man close to eighty, John Watson moved childlike through the house, recollecting times long past and people now gone. It is from conversations with him that will be the basis for almost all information about the house in this history.

During much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the A.O. Watson House did not stand alone. Instead, a similar residence was built adjacent to the A.O. Watson House and directly on the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Guadalupe St. This second house was built to accommodate the sisters and family members of Mrs. Watson. Later in life, A.O. Watson developed Parkinson's disease. Not having Parkinson's disease in his family history, John Watson hypothesized that A.O. Watson's exposure to the Influenza Epidemic of 1918 (which killed many of the Pope sisters living in the second house), was linked to the Parkinson's.

Unable to walk or climb stairs, A.O. Watson had a bridge placed in between his office on the second floor and the second floor of the now connected second house in order to visit his relatives and leave his residence from time to time. This is not the only innovation that he included in his home. Constantly on the road for work and inspired by Michelangelo's "Flying Machine," A.O. Watson dreamed of one day placing a helicopter pad on the top of his home and designed a flat space above his office accordingly.

These two houses were certainly grand and elegant; however, they were not alone. At the turn of the century, not unlike today, many wealthy families called Austin home. The Littlefield's, Brackenridge's, and others built homes "comparable to those on Park Avenue" in terms of price and decadence. While most of these early mansions were demolished in the 1970s to make way for parking lots and more space efficient designs, the A.O. Watson House survived.

After Mr. and Mrs. Watson passed away in the 1930s, the house was made into living quarters for one of the Watson daughters, with apartments filling the second floor. Bathrooms were

added, sometimes into seemingly random corners of the house, to accommodate this purpose. Today, these bathrooms give the house a charm of the unexpected. After John Watson became an architect himself, he returned to the building of his childhood and made it his office.

Room by room, the history of the house was revealed. The offices of a lawyer was once a room for Christmas trees and presents, or a sleeping porch, depending on the decade. My father's office, now a gauntlet of papers, legal pads, and briefcases, was once the master bedroom to A.O. and Minnie Watson. My office, once a room in the apartment of one of the first Texas Monthly editors. The conference room that serves as a lounge to county judges and commissioners is the same room that connected A.O. Watson by bridge to the second family house and is the same room that the helicopter pad was to be constructed upon. The room was also used as the office for two generations of Texas architects and the place where A.O. Watson drew his last breath.

John Watson has few memories of his grandfather. Born in 1929, John was only five years old when his grandfather passed. Looking out the front windows, John Watson began a story beginning with a familiar date. . .

"December 7, 1941," Arthur Page (A.P.) Watson and his son, John, were in the front yard. Perhaps they were watering the trees that A.P. had brought as seedlings from Washington DC after attending War College with General Douglas MacArthur. Suddenly, a neighbor began to yell at A.P., saying "The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor!" IN that instance, Mr. A.P. Watson returned inside, changed into his Army dress, and left his family to fight for his country in World War II. He would not come home until the end of the war.

The military, his son recalls, was A.P. Watson's passion in life. Educated at Culver Military Academy, Watson soon entered the Command and General Staff School and later the War College. During World War I, he was one of seven officers who accompanied General Pershing to France in 1917. A bright strategist, A.P. Watson took on more responsibility in the Second World War, helping plan many invasions in the Pacific Theater including Okinawa. By the time the war ended, Watson was a highly decorated Brigadier General. His honors include: Three Silver Stars, Two Legion of Merit with the Oak Leaf Cluster, a Purple Heart, the French Croix de Guerre, the General Staff Badge, the WWI Victory Medal with six battle stars, the Combat Infantryman's Badge, and the German and Japanese Occupation Ribbons. At the time of his death in 1965, Major General and President of Texas A&M University Earl Rudder served as a pallbearer.

Winston Churchill once said that "we shape our buildings—thereafter, they shape us." For John Watson, the evidence of this is seen in his choice to become an architect, inspired by his grandfather's legacy and home, as well as the ornate houses that surrounded their home. After graduation from the University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture, John Watson did not know which direction to take his career. He had been unhappy in school and was not inspired by the older forms and styles being taught. When he began to read about Frank Lloyd Wright and his new form of architecture called "organic architecture," this all changed. Without informing his

family or friends, he flew to Taliesin, Wisconsin and interviewed with Wright personally. In John Watson's words, "the meeting changed my life. Right there." he became a pupil of Wright, studying at Taliesin for two years and graduated with a new discipline in this new and modern school of architecture. Working in a more "radical" form, Watson now works mostly with structure, implementing glass and steel into his designs in a way that works in the natural environment.

When the Watson family moved from Edinburgh, Scotland to the birthplace of Texas during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they could not have known how influential the family was to become in shaping not only Texas history, but American history as well. It is A.O. Watson's lasting imprint in the architectural identity of many Texas counties and communities in Austin and in A.P. Watson's role in both World Wars, that the importance of the Watson name as memorialized by the remaining structure known as the A.O. Watson House is realized. It is the personal relationship with the most influential American architect of the modern age shared by John Watson that demarks the transition from the Victorian to the modern age of architecture in Texas. By every example, this family provides an exceptional and unique opportunity to see history in terms of the people who shaped it.

As John Watson walked out to his car under the covered lot in the back of the house, he continued to exude stories. He moved through the lot, pointed out ridges in the concrete, "There. That was a flower bed of my Aunt Maggie. She was one of the first women to graduate from the University of Texas Law School." He talked slowly and disconnected, more to himself that to me, about how the house once stood and how it has changed, as if transposing his memories upon this reality. There was not sadness in the final moments of his visit, just a man looking back on what has been. It is in buildings and places in which our history floods back over us—washing our hearing with the emotions that filled the space before---shaping us into who we are and who we will become.

## PUBLIC HEARING INFORMATION

Although applicants and/or their agent(s) are expected to participate in a public hearing, you are not required to do so. This meeting will be conducted online and you have the opportunity to speak FOR or AGAINST the proposed development or change. Email or call the staff contact for information on how to participate in the public hearings online. You may also contact a neighborhood or environmental organization that has expressed an interest in an application affecting your neighborhood.

During a public hearing, the board or commission may postpone or continue an application's hearing to a later date, or recommend approval or denial of the application. If the board or commission announces a specific date and time for a postponement or continuation that is not later than 60 days from the announcement, no further notice is required.

A board or commission's decision may be appealed by a person with standing to appeal, or an interested party that is identified as a person who can appeal the decision. The body holding a public hearing on an appeal will determine whether a person has standing to appeal the decision.

An interested party is defined as a person who is the applicant or record owner of the subject property, or who communicates an interest to a board or commission by:

- delivering a written statement to the board or commission before or during the public hearing that generally identifies the issues of concern (*it may be delivered to the contact person listed on a notice*); or
- appearing and speaking for the record at the public hearing; and;
- occupies a primary residence that is within 500 feet of the subject property or proposed development;
- is the record owner of property within 500 feet of the subject property or proposed development; or
- is an officer of an environmental or neighborhood organization that has an interest in or whose declared boundaries are within 500 feet of the subject property or proposed development.

A notice of appeal must be filed with the director of the responsible department no later than 14 days after the decision. An appeal form may be available from the responsible department.

For additional information on the City of Austin's land development process, please visit our website: [www.austintexas.gov/abc](http://www.austintexas.gov/abc)

Written comments must be submitted to the board or commission (or the contact person listed on the notice) before the public hearing. Your comments should include the board or commission's name, the scheduled date of the public hearing, the Case Number and the contact person listed on the notice.

Case Number: PR-20-149763 - 416 W 12TH ST  
Contact: Angela Gaudette, (512) 974-3393  
Public Hearing: Historic Landmark Commission, Nov. 16, 2020

☒ I am in favor  
☐ I object

Benjamin Blackburn 1106 San Antonio St ATX 78701

Your Name (please print)

Your address(es) affected by this application

Signature

Date

Comments:

Despite being registered as a historic property this building lacks the character of the other historic properties in the neighborhood. It's an eyesore and should be demolished.

If you use this form to comment, it may be returned to:

City of Austin Housing and Planning Department

Historic Preservation Office, ATTN: Angela Gaudette

P.O. Box 1088

Austin, TX 78767-8810

E-mail: [preservation@austintexas.gov](mailto:preservation@austintexas.gov)