

History of the Oklahoma City Preservation Ordinance and Heritage Hills Preservation

The 54rd annual Heritage Hills Homes Tour is being presented in a new format because of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

This is not the first pandemic that Heritage Hills has survived. During World War I residents resorted to the use of sleeping porches to stem the spread of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic. Sleeping porches were added and new homes build soon after included sleeping porches.

Enactment of the HP Ordinance in 1969 Deterred Inner-City Decay

The HP Ordinance was crafted by the Oklahoma City Historical Preservation Commission, created at the urging Heritage Hills leaders by the City of Oklahoma City and its progressive Mayor, George H. Shirk, long-time president of the Oklahoma Historical Society. The HP Commission and the Oklahoma City Planning Department embarked on a two-year study, which included a housing stock survey of all properties from NW 10th to NW 23rd, Broadway to Classen Blvd.

The result was enactment by the City Council of the HP Ordinance in 1969, and shortly thereafter, creation of the Heritage Hills Preservation District, Oklahoma City's first historic preservation district, which imposed zoning regulations to preserve the unique historic recourses of Oklahoma City located in Heritage Hills. While Heritage Hills was the first historic preservation district in the City, other neighborhoods soon took steps to protect the unique historic aspects of their neighborhoods with the creation of other historic preservation districts, thereby preserving inner City neighborhoods during times of widespread inner-city decay.

Heritage Hills would not exist today where it not for the efforts of its leaders, past and present, and enactment of the HP Ordinance.

An 80-year Effort to Save and Protect Heritage Hills

Prior to enactment to the HP Ordinance, the historic resources of Oklahoma City had been under attack since the 1930's, marked by a series of battles, some won, some lost. Leaders of Heritage Hills long battled commercial encroachment throughout Heritage Hills, funding and filing successful lawsuits in the District Court and winning in appeals to the Oklahoma Supreme Court. However, intense commercial pressure in the 1960's required a new approach, the enactment of an Historic Preservation Ordinance.

Loss of NW 13th and the Homes of City Pioneers Charles Colcord and Anton Classen

In 1929, there was no commercial property on NW 13th Street from Robinson west to Shartel. It was a residential Street showcased by the stately mansions of Charles F. Colcord, the builder of the City's First skyscraper in 1910, now the Colcord Hotel, and Anton B. Classen, namesake of Classen Schools and Classen Blvd.

The Colcord Mansion, with its grand neighboring residences, was located on the north side of NW 13th between Walker and Hudson Avenues, adjoining what is now the southern boundary of Heritage Hills Preservation District homes on NW 14th.

It is surprising and regrettable that NW 13th became a commercial street at all. It is not a section line road, as are NW 10th and NW 23rd, and it terminates at Western Ave. on the west, but its commercialization occurred before modern understanding of the value of preserving inner-city neighborhoods and historic resources.

Standard Life Insurance Company acquired the Colcord Mansion, which was demolished in the 1960's, constructing the near-windowless office building that exists today, which is no longer occupied by Standard Life. Demolition of the Colcord Mansion was a catalyst for enactment of the HP Ordinance.

The home of Anton B. Classen was located at 433 NW 13th at the northeast corner of Walker Ave and NW 13th, now the site of a parking lot serving the former Standard Life Building.

NW 14th Street Saved

In the 1960's Standard Life also acquired and converted residences on several blocks of NW 14th to office uses, including the classical Elizabethan mansion at 1414 N. Hudson (slated in 1964 to be demolished and used as a parking lot), the Spanish revival treasure at 1415 N. Hudson and the Neo-classical masterpiece at 500 NW 14th, each ringed with unique stories of famous people who created the colorful history of Oklahoma City.

The efforts of Heritage Hills residents saved NW 14th and saved these stately architectural gems, which have been occupied by generations of family in the ensuing 50-plus years. Today, the Ordinance protects NW 14th. *Were it not for the HP Ordinance, NW 14th would have surely met the fate of NW 13th!*

NW 16th Street Saved.

In 1966 the Oklahoma State Highway Department unveiled a plan to construct a wide boulevard along NW 16th Street from Classen Blvd to Broadway, to provide a north expressway loop around Downtown. This plan would have required the demolition of scores of historic homes in Heritage Hills and Mesta Park, and many of Oklahoma City's finest architectural treasures. Moreover, this plan would have divided and created a barrier between Heritage Hills and Mesta Park homes located to the north and south of the expressway. Heritage Hills mobilized and, with

the help of Mayor Shirk who recommended creation of an historic presentation ordinance, stopped the plan and saved Heritage Hills and Mesta Park.

City's History Preserved for Future Generations in HP Districts by Private Owners

Historic preservation ordinances protect the fragile historic resources of Oklahoma City, and are places where the history of our City, its leaders, famous and infamous, and its architectural pearls, are preserved for current and future citizens city-wide. These historical treasures are not preserved by the expenditure of city funds. Rather, historical homes are restored and maintained by their private owners; they consider ownership a sacred trust for future generations.

Historic Preservation and the Success of Oklahoma City

The quality and standing of a city, its sense of place, and its quality of life are determined in part by the extent which it preserves its historical and architectural resources. This urban planning precept was understood by the Heritage Hills leaders and Mayor George Shirk who championed the HP Ordinance, as well as the members of the City Council who enacted the Ordinance in 1969. Through their vision we now enjoy not only Heritage Hills and other historic neighborhoods, but also the success of Oklahoma City over this last half century.

Historic Preservation as an Economic Development Tool

Highly recruited employers bringing quality jobs are attracted to a city by its quality of life, which is greatly influenced by its preservation of historic and architectural resources. For example, the dilapidated and abandoned warehouse district east of Downtown area was once ripe for the wrecker's ball, but today Bricktown has contributed mightily to the ongoing success of Downtown. Oklahoma City economic development recruiters have long showcased Heritage Hills, other historic neighborhoods and Bricktown to economic development prospects as tangible examples of the vibrancy and quality of life of our City.

100th Anniversary of Wilson Elementary Arts Integration School in 2019

A vibrant city and its neighborhoods require quality education. The 2019 Historic Homes Tour celebrated the 100th Anniversary of Wilson School at 501 NW 21st. For 100 years-plus it has educated the children of Heritage Hills and adjoining neighborhoods, in some cases successive generations of Heritage Hills families. In 2019, Heritage Hills raised over \$50,000 for Wilson in honor of its 100th Anniversary.

Historic Preservation Requires Eternal Vigilance

In the 50-plus years since enactment of the HP Ordinance, generation after generation of Heritage Hills residents and leaders have been champions for the cause of historic perseverance. They have argued for upholding the HP Ordinance and the protection of Heritage Hills in the City's consideration of historic applications, public improvement and beatification plans, and the resolution of controversies.

In this pursuit, Heritage Hills has expended hundreds of thousands of dollars for legal fees, traffic studies, public improvement and beautification plans, and for the implementation of these plans. Moreover, Heritage Hills has spent decades advising and counseling homeowners as to historical preservation best-practices and techniques to ensure compliance with the HP Ordinance. In all of this, Heritage Hills has been aided by the professional urban and historic planners of the City's Planning Department, and the dedicated volunteers who have served and are serving as members of the City's Historical Preservation Commission.

Ever mindful of the demolition of the Colcord and Classen Homes and the commercialization of NW 13th, for 50-plus years the residents and leaders of Heritage Hills have, through their actions, said 'Never Again', and have pursued a path of eternal vigilance for the preservation of Oklahoma City's remarkable history and architecture.

The result of this ongoing effort, decade after decade, is the Heritage Hills that exists today, and the preservation of its irreplaceable historical resources that have greatly contributed to the quality of life and extraordinary success of Oklahoma City.

John Michael Williams