

Fairview Park and Travis Heights' History

From 1988 and 1989 brochures for the Live Oak Festival Tour of Homes, researched and written by Richard & Barbara Cilley

In 1878 Charles Augustus Newning, the agent for a New York banking company, arrived in Austin and set about looking for financial opportunities in Texas' burgeoning capital city.

Newning soon recognized Austin's need for a quality suburban development close to the city's center on the north bank of the Colorado river and cast about for a suitable site.

Though Newning was immediately taken by the broken, rugged bluffs on the south bank of the Colorado, irregular access across the flood-prone river was a major problem. Since Austin's earliest days, a ferry had served South Austin from the foot of Congress Avenue. In the 1870s, a wooden pontoon bridge, which washed away with each flood, spanned the river to serve the few residents living in South Austin.

Realizing that more reliable access to South Austin would be established shortly, Newning formed a partnership in 1880 with William H. Stacy and George Warner and purchased 200 acres on the south bank of the river east of South Congress Avenue to Fowber's Creek (now called Blunn Creek).

Subsequently, a stone toll bridge was opened across the river in 1883, and in 1886 a parade down Congress Avenue marked the opening of the first permanent free bridge to serve South Austin.

Newning took the lead in the partnership and named the new subdivision Fairview Park because it had a "fair view" of the city from the bluffs.

He emphasized from the first that Fairview Park should be a model residential development with graded, curving streets, utilities and extensive landscaping. Fairview Park was laid out with large lots that took advantage of the natural contours of the land to provide many dramatic home sites.

By 1891, a number of fine houses had been built in Fairview Park, including the Academy (402 Academy), the Dumble-Boatwright House (1419 Newning) and the Red-Purcell House (210 Academy).

A cooperative livery stable was operating and electricity and water lines had been extended across the river. The Brunson House, also located in Fairview Park, is an early Twentieth Century style, the bungalow.

Fairview Park has continued to be built out to this present day with especially notable waves of building activity in the first decade of the 20th century and 1919 through 1941.

Fairview Park was William Harwood Stacy's first brush with residential development. He was also active in many civic causes and served in the Texas Volunteers, the state militia from 1880 until 1907, rising from the rank of private to major general, having served in the Spanish-American War and been commander of the Texas National Guard from 1902 to 1907.

General Stacy, a tireless promoter of real estate ventures, was responsible for developing the Harwood neighborhood west of the University of Texas campus and a number of other, smaller additions. However, his greatest achievement was the opening of the Travis Heights subdivision in 1913 on a large tract directly east of Fairview Park.

Based on his earlier experience with Charles Newning and the success of Fairview Park, coupled with his shrewd business sense, General Stacy laid out his South Austin subdivision with both curving and grid streets and provided lot sizes and prices to fit a range of customers, from the builders of modest bungalows to grand home sites with commanding vistas.

To promote his properties, the General ran streetcars full of prospective buyers out to Travis Heights from the Capitol. He also incorporated deed restrictions against multi-family and commercial development into his subdivision to reassure buyers that Travis Heights would remain a residential enclave.

Travis Heights was an immediate success and a great surge of homebuilding took place in the 1920s, so that by the General's death in 1928, 600 lots had been sold and more than 160 homes built.

After General Stacy's death, his three sons, Harwood, Gillespie, and Franklin Stacy, took over their father's interests and continued to develop Travis Heights.

The Victorian Era was one that had a more formal regimen of manners and living styles and their homes reflected it. Interior appointments were ornate and rooms were designed for formal entertaining.

Twentieth Century homes are more informal and designed for a simpler, more casual way of life. The interiors are less formal with simpler architectural ornament. All of the homes take advantage of their sites in different ways. Some of them are sited around oak trees and others simply incorporate the oaks in their large lots.