CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission **Planning and Development Department**

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Tomasino House
OWNER: Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc.
APPLICANT: Same as Owner
LOCATION: 1514 Wilson Street – Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: III.e
HPO FILE NO: 08PL52
DATE ACCEPTED: Dec-14-07
HAHC HEARING: Jan-24-08
PC HEARING: Feb-14-08

SITE INFORMATION:

Lot 10, Block 3, Porter and Baker Addition, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic, one-story wood frame house.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The Tomasino House, located at 1514 Wilson in Freedmen's Town, is a one-story, wood frame cottage built circa 1910. The house sits on the former homestead of Italian grocer, Antonio Tomasino, Jr., and it is one of two remaining buildings constructed for Antonio and his wife, Rosalie. The house is listed as a contributing historic building of high significance in the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District, a community settled after Emancipation that became a thriving center of black social, cultural, religious, and commercial activity through the first three decades of the 20th century. During this time period, more than 95% of Houston's first black businesses were located in the neighborhood. The house also has the additional distinction of being the only remaining building of its type in the community. Not only does the house have significance for its association with the Italian immigrant who built it and occupied it for a number of years, but it has significance also for its association with the Italian families who, after moving away, still retained ownership of these properties and rented them to black, working families, who were unable to buy a home in their neighborhood. One of those individuals was Jacob Nixon, who rented and lived in it for many years.

The Tomasino House meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 as well being a contributing building to the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District for Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The Tomasino House, circa around 1910, is one of five houses built originally for Italian immigrant and grocer, Antonio Tomasino, Jr., and his wife, Rosalie, in the Porter and Baker Subdivision in Freedmen's Town. After the Civil War, emancipated slaves congregated in this area that was then located on the southwestern fringe of Houston. New subdivisions, such as Seneshal Addition (1848) and the Justin Castanie Addition (1848), two G. S. Hardcastle Additions, and three other real estate developments undertaken by William R. Baker, accommodated this settlement. As early as the 1880s the district was referred to as 'Freedmantown.' In the early 1900s, Freedmen's Town encompassed an area bounded by Buffalo Bayou, Sutton Street, Taft Street, and Prairie Street downtown. Today, the boundaries have been reduced to Taft, Heiner, West Dallas, and West Gray Streets. The Porter and Baker Subdivision, originally known as Obedience Smith's Lot 30, was property that was part of a settlement from Smith's

vast estate. James A. Baker, Jr. (grandfather of James A. Baker III) bought the lot from Smith's heirs and sold an undivided one-half interest to George L. Porter. Platted in 1889, the Porter and Baker Addition includes four blocks bounded by Andrews on the north, Wilson on the east, Bailey on the west, and Victor on the south.

Antonio Tomasino's grandfather, father, and uncles emigrated from Italy to the U. S. between 1886 and 1901. The Tomasino family first resided in New Orleans before moving to 1301 O'Neill Street in the Freedmen's Town community. In 1907, they began operating the Tomasino Brothers Grocery and Meat Market on their homestead. Antonio and Rosalie Tomasino purchased Lots 9 and 10 in Block 3 of the Porter and Baker Subdivision for $850 from H. J. Simpson in 1909. As evidenced by a mechanic's lien executed on August 7, 1912, they paid $1875 to William H. Chryar (1880-1940), an African-American carpenter, builder, and contractor from New Orleans, to build a two-story house, one shotgun house, and three cottages on the property. The two-story Tomasino residence had living quarters on the top floor and a grocery store on the bottom. Some of the intersections in the Freedmen's Town district were occupied by smaller, corner grocery stores attached to or built next to homes and operated by Italian immigrants. Over the years, these early Italian families came to own much of the land in the district, although their descendants have long since moved to other areas of the city. The Tomasino family resided in the community until 1944. Chryar himself lived in Freedmen's Town for about two years before moving to the Independence Heights community in 1913, where he too opened a grocery store.

Before the Tomasinos moved into their new, two-story homestead in 1917, they leased 1518-1520 Wilson to grocer, James F. Gorman, from 1913-1915. According to the 1911-1912 city directory, Amanda Price was the first to occupy the cottage at 1514 Wilson. Price moved out after a year, and various other tenants lived in the cottage over the next twelve years.

Not only does the house have significance for its association with the Italian immigrant who built it and occupied it for a number of years, but it has significance also for its association with the Italian families who, after moving away, still retained ownership of these properties and rented them to black, working families, who were unable to buy a home in their neighborhood. One of those individuals was Jacob Nixon, who rented and lived in it for many years. In 1925, Jacob Nicholson (Nixon), an African-American, moved into the cottage. A native of Louisiana, he and his wife, Edith, had eleven children and lived in the house for over 35 years. Nixon worked as a cotton compressor for the Magnolia Company for several years, and Edith was a homemaker. After Jacob's death in 1961, his daughter, Lula Belle Crawford, moved into the house. In the early 1970s, Louise D'Armata, the Tomasinos' daughter, inherited the homestead and continued to rent to black families. In 1999, Lula Belle Crawford moved out of the cottage, and it has been unoccupied ever since.

When the R. B. H. Yates Museum, Inc., purchased the property on February 14, 2005, there was a workman's cottage (1404 Victor) and two additional houses (1406 Victor, 1512 Victor) on the property. The latter two houses were destroyed by fire on February 28, 2005 and hastily demolished the same night. Almost 75% of the historic district's buildings have been demolished. Yet the historic district remains extremely significant not only architecturally and historically, but also for its association with freed slaves who moved there to live, work and open businesses of their own. Since so few of the historic buildings remain, they are even more significant today. Moreover, these buildings also represent a significant element of community sentiment as well as public pride. Since 1996 the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, Inc. has been an advocate for the preservation not only of the neighborhood's remaining historic buildings, but also an advocate for education about the neighborhood's history and culture as well.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:

The house at 1514 Wilson Street is a front gabled, one-story side hall, wood frame cottage with an inset entrance porch at the southeast corner. It is one-and-a-half bays wide and five bays long. A single window opening faces the street, as does the front door in the inset porch. A rectangular attic-level window is centered beneath the peak of the gable. The house is surfaced with wood clapboards. The design is derived from the typology of the shotgun cottage, although at one-and-a-half bays in width, it is wider than the classic shotgun cottage.

The interior of the house has three rooms with a hallway that runs the full length down the south side of the house. The front and back doors seem to have been in line at either end of the hallway originally. At some point, the back porch on the west end was enclosed and the door moved to the center.

The R. B. H Yates Museum (RBHYM) is completing restoration planning that began in 2004 prior to purchase of the property.

- Phase 1 – Foundation restoration and reinforcement design, environmental site assessments, geophysical engineering, archaeological, and architectural services have been provided by several Prairie View A&M architecture student interns who were funded by RBHYM, and worked under the guidance of Ray & Hollington Architects, Walter P. Moore Engineers, ERC & Tide Water Environmental, and YCAP-Yates Community Archaeology Field School project.
- Phase II – Foundation restoration and reinforcement. The structure will be moved approximately 20 feet to install new piers and beams and to reinforce the originals. The structure will be moved back to its original location and anchored to the restored foundation.
- Phase III – Completion of final architectural documentation, planning, and restoration of the structures in 2009. The building will house the Archaeology Field School Lab with archival and exhibit space.

Since 2005, the R.B.H. Yates Museum, Inc., has been using this property for their YCAP – Yates Community Archaeology Project – a University of Houston and Houston Community College-accredited archaeology field school. Since 2002, the R.B.H. Yates Museum has sponsored Prairie View A&M University architecture student interns to complete the documentation and architectural planning for restoration for all of the R.B.H. Yates Museum's historic houses and green classroom spaces, as well as four historic churches in the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

United States Census 1910, 1930, Harris County, Texas.

Sanborn Maps, 1907, 1925, 1934.

Houston City Directories, 1911-1912, 1917, 1925, 1955.

U.S. Phone and Address Directories, 1993-2002.

Harris County Plat Records, Porter and Baker Addition, Vol. 43, Pg 590.

Harris County Contract Records, Vol. 30, Pg 551.

National Register of Historic Places, Nomination Form, Freedmen's Town District.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Diana DuCroz, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION:

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

S	NA		S - satisfies NA - not applicable
Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-229(a)(1):			
☑	☐	(1)	Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation (Sec. 33-224(a)(1);
☐	☑	(2)	Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event (Sec. 33-224(a)(2);
☑	☐	(3)	Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation (Sec. 33-224(a)(3);
☑	☐	(4)	Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city (Sec. 33-224(a)(4);
☑	☐	(5)	Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood (Sec. 33-224(a)(5);
☑	☐	(6)	Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation (Sec. 33-224(a)(6);
☑	☐	(7)	Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present (Sec. 33-224(a)(7);
☑	☐	(8)	Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride (Sec. 33-224(a)(8).
AND			
☐	☑	(9)	If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b).
OR			
☐	☑		The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2);

OR

☑ ☐ The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a "contributing structure" in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3);

OR

☐ ☑ The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Tomasino House at 1514 Wilson Street.

SITE LOCATION MAP
TOMASINO HOUSE
1514 WILSON STREET
NOT TO SCALE