

# Historic Preservation Commission Could Help Save Homes

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Several years ago, Ron Hardy hoped to restore a rusticated stone-block house on Oakland Street.

Hardy envisioned the structure, built just after 1890 and the prior residence of Shreveport Mayor Reuben Neil McKellar (served 1896-1900), as a key feature of a Ledbetter Heights Historic Entertainment District, a concept he had for the four-block area north of the city jail and west of Lawrence Street.

Hardy wanted to use the former residence to headquarter his nonprofit Allendale music-educational outreach Playaz and Playettes and his commercial Red Beans and Rice Productions, as well as house a recording studio.

He worked with the owner's father, Floyd Alford, on plans to restore the structure and secured funding from the Carolyn W. and Charles Beaird Family Foundation to construct a model and design the entertainment district. (Alford purchased the home in 1996 and then conveyed it to his daughter, Delosa Alford Washington, in 2005.)

But Hardy's plans have since stalled due to complications of developing a city park within the district. So the imposing house remains among the city's most endangered historical structures, according to local historians.

Shreveport has lost many historic homes over the past few decades, including former Gov. Huey Long's first Shreveport residence and Peter Youree's Youreeka mansion. But historians and city officials hope that soon will change as the city's new Historic Preservation Commission gets up and running.

It's frustrating to see these historic homes being demolished, Councilman Jeff Everson said. But the city must balance preservation efforts with public safety, he added.

The Shreveport City Council was able to maintain that balance earlier this month by agreeing to save six shotgun homes on Peabody Street that were listed among dozens of properties recommended for demolition.

Norla Preservation, a local nonprofit that wants to re-purpose shotgun houses in Ledbetter Heights, plans to renovate and use the structures as retail, restaurant or small-business spaces. The council granted the organization permission to remove materials from the other properties prior to their demolition so they can be used to renovate the shotgun houses that were saved.

"We're making the best effort we can to sort of compromise and maintain public safety but also the integrity of some of these historic structures," Everson said.

Historian Gary Joiner is optimistic that the Commission will be successful in saving historic houses.

For decades, particularly the 1960s and 1970s, Shreveport demolished historic buildings without a thought, he said. The variety of residential architectural styles— Queen Anne, Victorian, art deco, mid-century modern— in the city is something to be cherished, Joiner said. And the Historic Preservation Commission may be the entity to help Shreveport do that, he said.

“I think this Historic Preservation Commission is really the smartest thing this city has done in 50 years,” Joiner said. “If the city will let it thrive, and it seems to be doing that, it ought to work.”

But the entity and organizations such as Norla Preservation are not the only ones putting forth an effort to save these houses. There are many local residents who invest their money in renovating historic structures, particularly in Highland, said Tom Arceneaux, Highland Restoration Association president.

James and Pamala Eakin began renovating a five-bedroom brick house in Highland in 1992. When the couple purchased the 1920s home designed by renowned architect Edward F. Neild, its walls were mildewed, it had a hole in the master bedroom and only had enough working wiring to light a single room.

But the couple fell in love with the house. They were determined to restore it.

“We could both see the potential,” James Eakin said.

So they toiled on it after work and on weekends, and even now consider it a work in progress. They only recently added a deck and swimming pool in the backyard and now are painting the exterior.

They knew they couldn't do it all at once and decided to gradually add projects as they could afford them.

That is how many residents renovate older houses that require costly initial projects such as electrical rewiring or updated plumbing.

Hardy, who owns the former residence of A.B. Palmer, a woman most well-known for operating Shreveport's Negro Joy Fund from 1922 to 1972, also renovated his home by doing it one step at a time.

He said when complications arose with plans for the McKellar-Bridges house and the Ledbetter Heights Historic Entertainment District, he turned his attention to his own home, which he purchased in the 1990s but that had deteriorated after years of renting out.

“This was always sort of my ace-in-the-hole,” he said.

Hardy said he's not given up on his vision for the Oakland Street house but he's waiting to see if the city park plans can materialize in a couple years.

For now, he's focused on restoring the Palmer home, which is significant to Shreveport's black community.