

STEAMBOAT/ROPES HOUSE

Location: 1517 North Mesquite St.
Lots 1-6, Blk 60, Beach, located in the northwest corner of the intersection of Mesquite Street and Fitzgerald Street, East of North Broadway Street, and West of North Chaparral Street.
Corpus Christi
Nueces County
Texas
DMS: 27°48'20" N 97°23'47" W

*This point represents the approximate center point of the current location of the building and was obtained on June 3, 2024, using Google Earth.

Present Owner: City of Corpus Christi: Parks and Recreation Department

Occupant: Vacant

Significance: The Steamboat/Ropes House stands as the most significant example of Steamboat Gothic architecture in the city. It is considered one of the few remaining High Victorian “gingerbread” houses in Corpus Christi. Built by Col. Elisia Ropes in the 1890s, this historic home is part of eleven homes estimated to have been built by Ropes. Capt. W. T. Ropes, a retired Army officer and brother to Col. Ropes played a role in the “Ropes Boom” in Corpus Christi, which unfortunately faced financial ruin in 1893. The Steamboat/Ropes House remains one of the few intact representations of Col. Ropes’s architectural work in the city. Interestingly, it does not appear on the 1919 Sanborn map for its location on Carancahua Street. However, in 1927 it did appear in both the Sanborn map and the City Directory.

Project Information:

This report was undertaken in advance of the demolition of the Steamboat/Ropes House due to its extensive disrepair and unsafe conditions. The Landmark Commission, in a letter dated December 19, 2019, to the Parks and Recreation Department, approved with conditions, the Certificate of Appropriateness for Demolition (COAD). This report was requested as partial mitigation for the project.

Description: The original building was described in the 1991 City Historic Sites Survey (Green Books) as having a foundation that was pier and beam, supported by wooden blocks. The exterior included a skirt wall and a wood-framed structural system. The roof is hipped with gables and covered in composition shingles. Box eaves and a fascia board added architectural detail. Additionally, there were hipped dormers and a window's walk with a turned-wood balustrade. The porch was a single-bay design, projecting in a U-shape reminiscent of the bow of a ship. It had a shed roof, turned-wood supports, a wooden floor, and a turned-wood balustrade. The windows were 2/12 and 4/4 wood double hung, and there were several entry doors, each with a transom.

The description of the building as it sits in Heritage Park remains the same with a few major alterations. The current building is one-half of the original home but retains the defining characteristics that gave it its name. The interior cabinetry, bathroom fixtures, and flooring have all been altered/updated with circa 1970s-80s components, except for the glass cabinets in the back room. The roof has been altered but still retains the hipped architectural features. Composite shingles remain on the roof, wood-turned balustrades remain on the exterior and interior of the building, and the interior doors look to be original four-panel style.

History: As a single-family, Steamboat Gothic-style house, the Steamboat/Ropes house is unique to the standard Victorian-style homes of the same size that were being constructed during this period. The home represents the characteristics and creativity of this type of upper-class living during the short boom in Corpus Christi in the late 1800s. The feature that sets the Steamboat/Ropes house apart from the popular architectural style during this era is the widow's walk on the second floor and the matching first-floor deck resembling the bow of a ship. The widow's walk was not only decorative, but it was also a functional aspect of the home.

Most of the sources suggest that the home was built by Capt. William T. Ropes. However, some sources suggest that the home was one of eleven houses designed and built by E.H. Ropes: the brother mostly known for his enterprising efforts in Corpus Christi during this period. A more reasonable suggestion would be that both brothers played an integral part in the design and construction of the home.

The home was originally built as a single-family home in 1890 near present-day Ropes Park off Ocean Drive, within the vicinity of the historic Alta Vista Hotel. In the 1920s, it was moved to 802 South

Carancahua Street by Ed Brennan where it was divided into apartments. In 1935 it showed up in the City Directory as Neiman Apartments owned by Mrs. Tillie Neiman. By 1944, the City Directory shows that it was owned by H. C. Neiman. Both accounts show that six apartments were being rented during this time. During its tenure as an apartment complex, the Steamboat/Ropes house began to show signs of neglect.

In 1982, a historic building survey by Grossman and Rome identified the home as a landmark, but their intention to include the home in a proposed historic district with the homes on Furman Avenue never came to fruition. The 1991 City Historic Sites Survey (Green Books) also identified the home as a high-priority potential landmark.

The lot that the Steamboat/Ropes house sat on, as well as many of the surrounding lots were bought by Morris Lichtenstein Jr. of the Lichtenstein Foundation. Jim Charnquist, of the Houston-based Developers who had grown up in Corpus Christi, bought the house From the Lichtenstein Foundation and donated it to the city.

The home was relocated to 1517 Mesquit Street. During the relocation, the building was placed on cast-in-place concrete piers. This significant move was made possible by Ordinance number 026997, which allocated \$70,000 from the FY 2007 Capital Budget. In FY2010, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) requested an additional \$125,000. Their goal was to preserve the house by restoring the exterior and weatherproofing it. This protective measure was intended to safeguard the house and its interior. The long-term vision included a second phase of restoration to preserve the house's preservation for the community. Unfortunately, the requested funds from CDBG were not granted.

In 2018, a structural evaluation of the Steamboat/Ropes house was conducted by the City of Corpus Christi and AECOM consultants. They concluded that the home was in extensive disrepair and "unsafe to fully explore at the time of the survey." It seemed that Hurricane Harvey had wreaked havoc on an already dilapidated building in 2017. The estimated total construction cost came to \$455,900.00. A Certificate of Appropriateness for Demolition was approved with conditions in December 2019. The conditions required architectural drawings, a 'white paper,' and the recovery of any salvageable items before demolition.

Ropes Brothers: Whenever the Steamboat House is mentioned, the conversation often shifts to the Ropes brothers, particularly Elihu H. Ropes. However, sources suggest that his brother, William T. Ropes resided in the house while it was on Ocean Drive. The sources themselves are conflicting, stating that both brothers built the house while others said that the home was one of Elihu's eleven houses he was involved in building, designing, or both, during his time at Corpus Christi. Most likely, both accounts are true, the brothers worked together but had very different personalities.

William T. Ropes retired from the Union Army at the rank of Captain. He spent most of his career in New Jersey where he and his brother Elihu was born and raised. Elihu spent three years in the New Jersey Guard reaching the rank of Colonel. Both were Civil War veterans. From what is known about both brothers a determination can be made, William was more of a behind-the-scenes kind of person, while Elihu was the outspoken salesman. William was heavily involved in Elihu's land dealings including the purchase of Mustang Island. He can be found in legal documents concerning warranty deeds and deeds of trust. Elihu is mentioned as being "fluent of tongue," and quite a schemer. This would account for the focus on Elihu when it comes to the history of the city. Elihu had big plans for Corpus Christi, many of which might have been very successful had it not been for the crash.

Elihu H. Ropes visited Corpus Christi in 1888 while he was recovering from diphtheria. At the time the population of the city was approximately 4500. Elihu noticed that Corpus Christi would be a perfect spot for a deepwater port, something the residents have been wanting for some time. He purchased Mustang Island for \$25,000, took a hike on the island, and found a natural pass where he began to dredge. It was known as the Port Ropes Pass. Dredging the pass was simply one of many projects that Elihu and his brother were involved in.

Elihu established a corporation to acquire real estate along the bluff and constructed the 125-room Alta Vista Hotel. He built what they called a "steam dummy railway" that transported people to the hotel. The tracks ran from the old courthouse down Chaparral Street to what is now called Santa Fe Street. He planned a parkway that would run five miles along what he called Ocean Drive, as well as plans for Ocean Park. He participated in the streetcar system and bought twenty blocks to develop into "The Cliffs." Additionally, Ropes founded the Corpus Christi and South American Railroad Company to realize his vision of a railroad stretching from Corpus Christi to Brownsville, across Mexico, and through Central and South America. All that came of the railroad

scheme could be found south of the city where a few miles of grade were thrown up in 1890.

Although his influence on Corpus Christi resulted in what is known as the “Ropes Boom,” a few years later things began to fall apart for Elihu. His constant struggles with the Ropes Pass channel continued. His dredge continued to break down and with no current in the pass, it was a battle to keep the silt from settling. In 1893 a depression hit and Elihu’s many business ventures began to fail; he couldn’t pay taxes or his bills. Investors lost large sums of money, making Ropes a target for stressed-out individuals like Matt Dunn, who invested his life savings into Ropes’ schemes, to knock Elihu across the head with his cane out of frustration. The economic depression hit everyone hard and to save face, Elihu decided to go back to New York. Shortly after his relocation to New York, Elihu suddenly died of a stroke in 1897.

A landmark marker can be found in Ropes Park in honor of Elihu Harrison Ropes for his efforts in developing Corpus Christi. What he is most known for is creating an awareness of the city’s potential and influencing future developers and entrepreneurs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

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Givens, Murphy, and Jim Moloney. *Corpus Christi: A History*. Nueces Press, 2011.

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McAlester, Virginia Savage. *A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America’s Domestic Architecture*. Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, 2015.

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Barnes, Rosemary. “‘Pastry War’ Influenced Naming of Flour Bluff.” *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, June 16, 1983.

Centennial Issue. Unknown Author. “Rounded Porches Gave the name to Ropes ‘Steamboat House.’” *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, December 12, 1983.

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Givens, Murphy. “Corpus Christi’s Go-Go Years.” *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, June 10, 1998.

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Kelly, Mary Gene. "City had Always Spent Gay, Friendly Holiday Season." *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, December 21, 1947.

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DOCUMENTS/SURVEYS

Nueces County Records on surveys concerning the purchase of Mustang Island by E.H. Ropes and Company.

Survey Numbers 206, 205, and 64, Mustang Island

- OPTION OF PURCHASE: Dated May 15, 1888. Filed July 18, 1888. Vol S, page 275
John Little to E.H. Ropes
- EXTENSION OF OPTION: Dated March 5, 1889. Filed November 21, 1889. Vol. T,
Page 189. John Little to E.H. Ropes.
- EXTENSION AGREEMENT: Dated April 11, 1890. Filed May 30, 1890. Vol. T, page
533. John Little to E. H. Ropes.

Nueces County Deed Records concerning the purchase of Mustang Island, bounded as follows: On the North by Aransas Pass and Turtle Cove, on the East by the Gulf of Mexico, on the South by Corpus Christi Pass, and on the West by the Laguna Madre and Corpus Christi Bay.

- WARRANTY DEED: Dated November 19, 1890. Filed December 2, 1890. Vol. V,
Page 233. E.H. Ropes, per Jas. M. Ropes, his Attorney in Fact to The Port Ropes
Company.
- DEED: Dated November 23, 1895. Filed November 29, 1895. Vol. 2, page 129.
The Port Ropes Company, by E. H. Ropes, President to F. G. Bourne.
- DEED: Dated December 27, 1893. Filed January 4, 1894. Vol. Z, page 435. F. G.
Bourne, by E. H. Ropes, Attorney in Fact to W. A. Leary, Trustee.
- DEED: Date February 21, 1894. Filed March 13, 1894. Vol. Z, page 510. W. A. Leary
to William T. Ropes, as Trustee.

Approved Letter to Parks and Rec. for COAD. 2019.



CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS OF THE LANDMARK COMMISSION

December 19, 2019

DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

2406 Leopard
First Floor
Corpus Christi
Texas 78408
Phone 361-826-3240
www.cctexas.com

Administration
Fax 361-826-3006

Land Development
Fax 361-826-3571

Project Management
Fax 361-826-3006

Building Permits
Fax 361-826-4375

Jermel Stevenson
Parks and Recreation Department
1201 Leopard Street
Corpus Christi, TX 78401

COAD 1219-01

Certificate of Appropriateness for Demolition (COAD) to allow for the demolition of a building on a tract of land being described as 1517 Mesquite Street and described as Lots 1-6, Block 60, Beach, located in the northwest corner of the intersection of Mesquite Street and Fitzgerald Street, East of North Broadway Street, and west of North Chaparral Street.

Property Owner: City of Corpus Christi: Parks and Recreation Department
1201 Leopard Street
Corpus Christi, TX 78401

Dear Sir,

After reviewing facts and taking public testimony, the above-referenced request was **approved with conditions** by the City of Corpus Christi Landmark Commission ("Board") on December 20, 2019.

Conditions:

1. Architectural Drawings of the building utilizing Point Cloud Modeling or other methods shall be provided and archived prior to demolition.
2. Salvageable portions of the Steamboat House that can be used in other historic preservation projects at Heritage Park or elsewhere in Corpus Christi will undergo requisition and storage for the purpose of future restorations.
3. A historical review of the building and the Ropes Brother's legacy will be conducted to produce a "white paper" or an authoritative document that will be attached with the Architectural Drawings or Point Cloud Modeling and archived.

Please submit required documentation in place with all conditions with your application for a demolition permit. A list of items to be salvaged shall be provided to the Landmark Commission and staff.

If you have any questions, you may contact Craig Garrison at (361) 826-3828
or Andrew Dimas at (361) 826-3584 or via email at CraigG@cctexas.com or
AndrewD2@cctexas.com.


Al Raymond
Director, Development Services

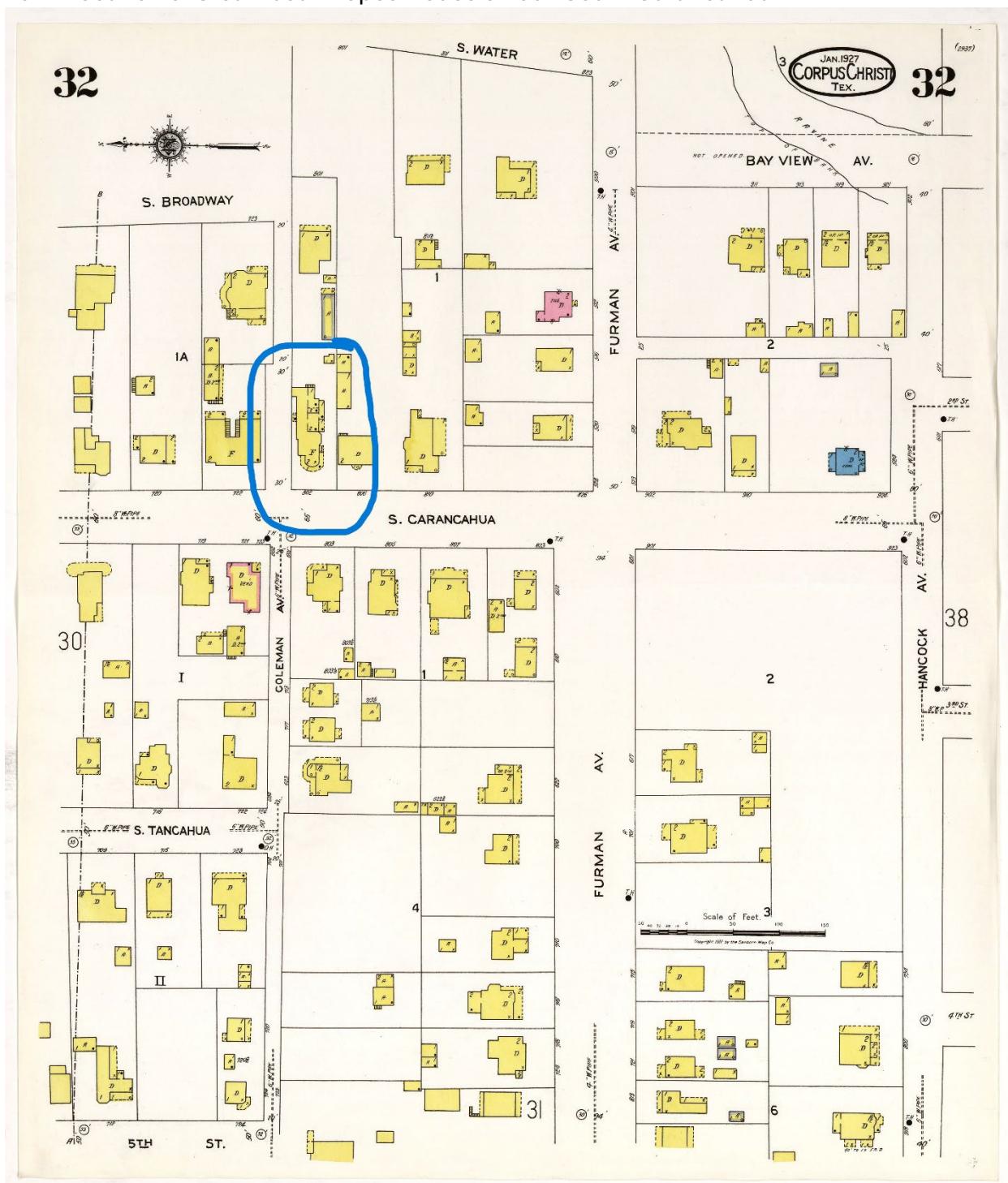

12.23.19

Date

cc: File

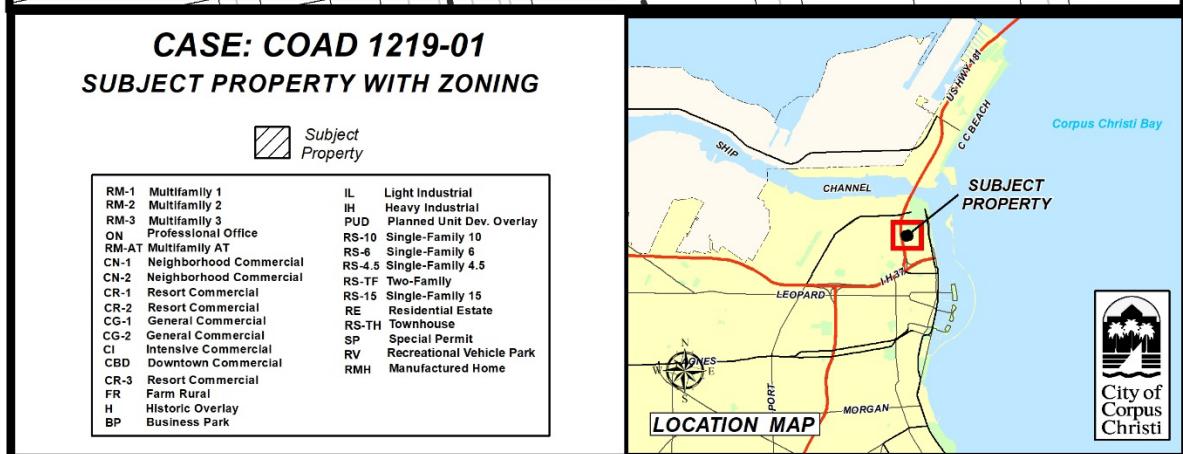
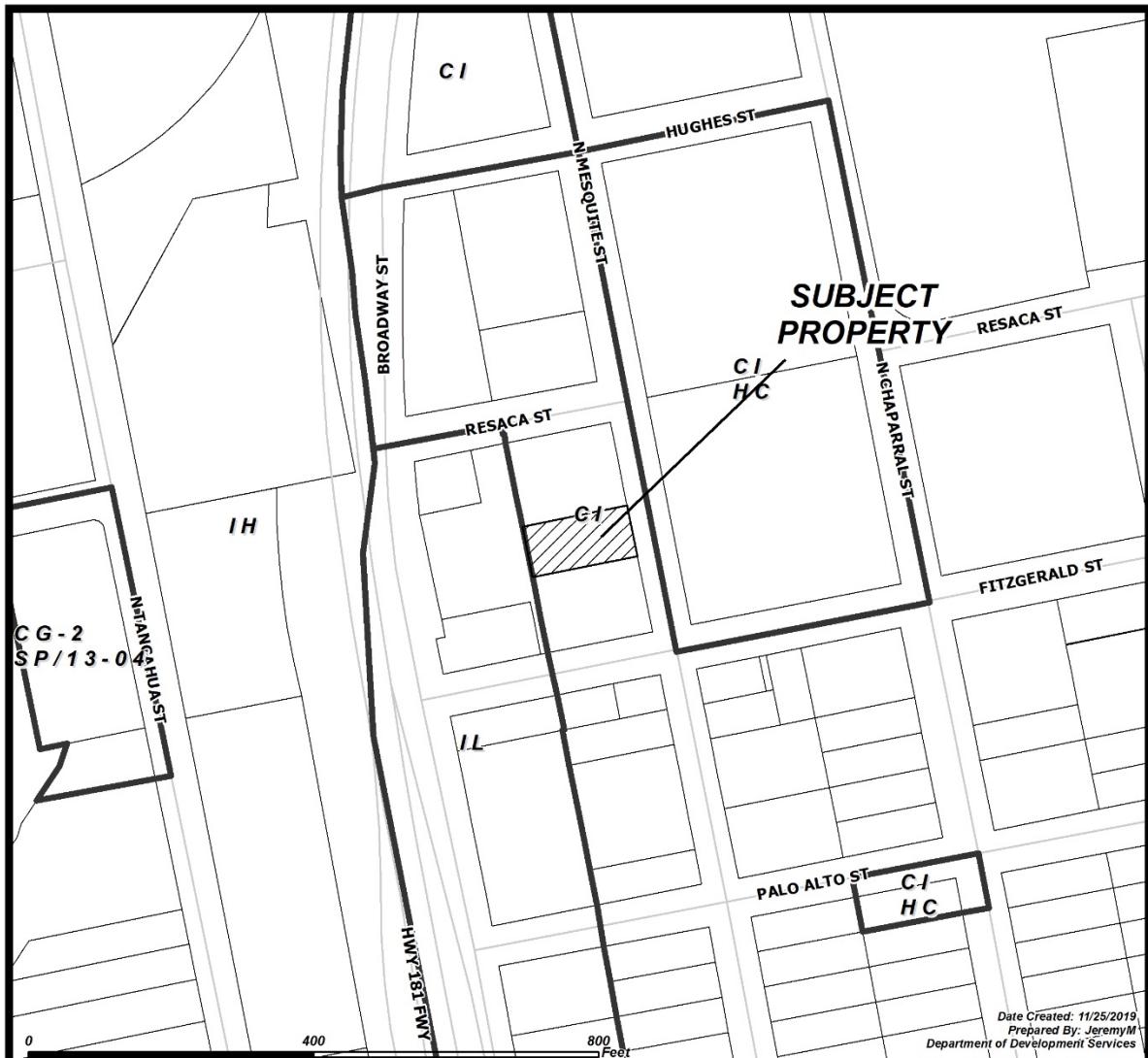
Maps:

1927 Location of Steamboat/Ropes House on 802 South Carancahua.

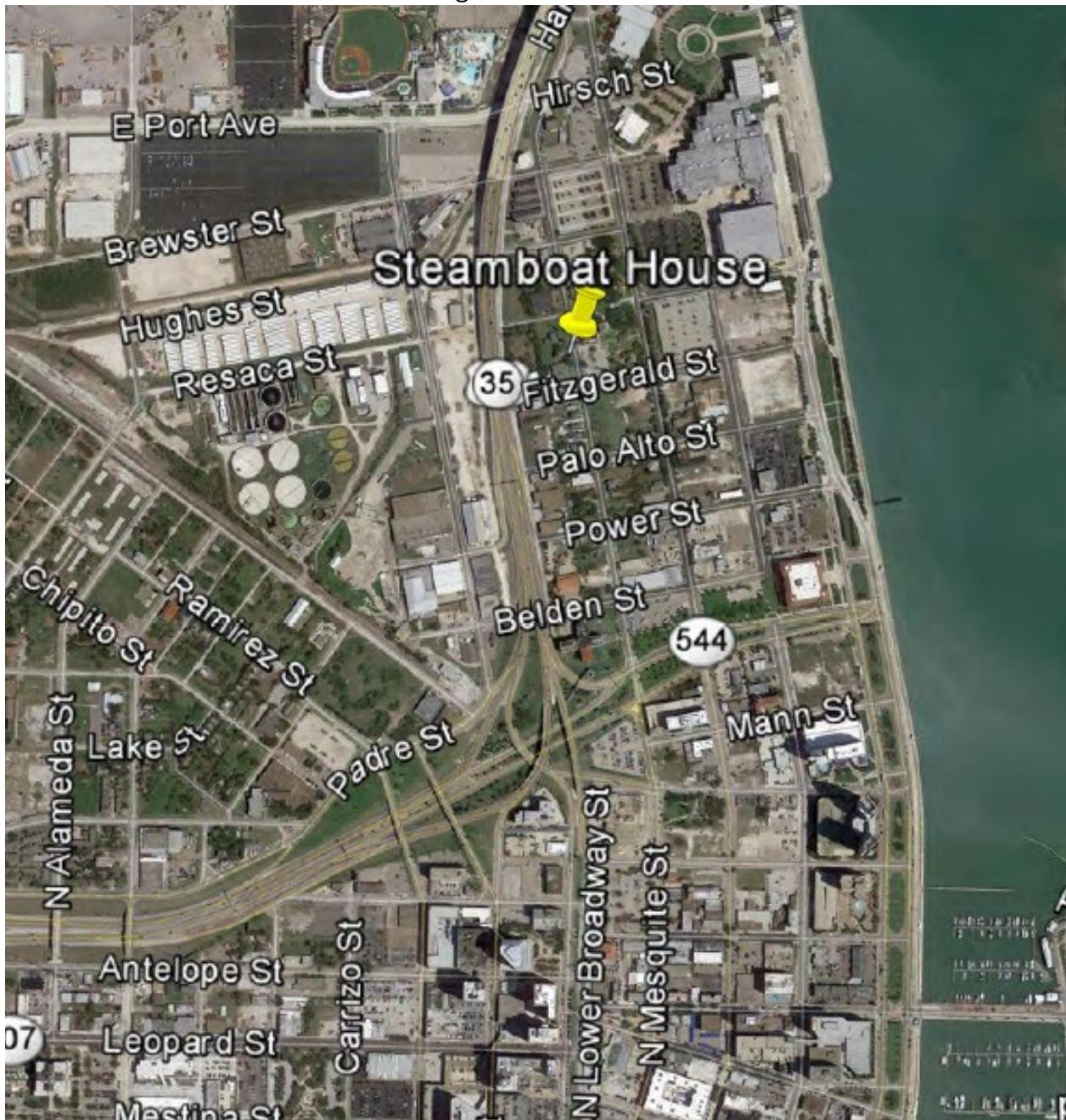


Original located at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin

GIS Map of Current Location.



Overhead of Current Location in Heritage Park.



Historic Photos:

Ed Brennan Movers. Moving house in 1920 to 802 Carancahua. Caller Times: 1983.



Moving to Heritage Park in 2007 Caller Times: 2007.



Photo by Zaneen Radwin/Caller Times

Moving to Heritage Park in 2007. Caller Times: 2007



Moving to Heritage Park in 2007. Caller Times: 2007.



CURRENT IMAGES AND STATE OF DISREPAIR:



Northeast corner. Damage to Balusters and porch cover.



Southeast corner. Siding damage.



Corbel and roof edge dry rot.



Roof Damage.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS: Prepared by ARDURRA for the City of Corpus Christi.

