

HOUSTON PAST & PRESENT

HEARTBREAK IN THE HEIGHTS

NEW OWNER DEMOLISHES A NATIONALLY REGISTERED
HISTORIC LANDMARK TO MAKE WAY FOR NEW RESTAURANT



Before: The McDonald House at 1801 Ashland, better known as the Ashland House Tea Room, on January 26, 2006

After: The McDonald House on January 30, 2006



BY LINDA BARTH • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK STERLING

“How could this happen?” Houstonians who care about history found themselves asking this question on January 31.

The McDonald House at 1801 Ashland was built in 1907 by John E. McDonald. Years later it became the Ashland House Tea Room, hosting countless social gatherings, lunches and teas. Located a block from the Heights’ commercial center, Ashland House was a visible, handsome reminder of Houston’s gracious past.

In 1983, the house was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, but such listing does not prevent places from being demolished. In Houston the only way to protect a building from demolition is for the owner to have it designated as a “Protected Landmark” under the City of Houston’s historic preservation ordinance. If an owner doesn’t want the designation, the government can’t require it.

In the mid-90s, the operators of the Ashland House Tea Room relocated to Spring Branch, and the house was sold to various owners. This January, the new owner of the house, Ryan Hildebrand, and business partner Matthew Pridgen planned to start a new restaurant called Table in the Heights on the site. Their contractor told neighbors the building was being renovated, according to Mark Sterling, Land Use Chair of the Houston Heights Association.

Then, on Jan. 24, a plumber for Hildebrand applied for and received a demolition permit for 1801 Ashland. Randy Pace, City of Houston Historic Preservation Officer, learned of the permit, contacted Sterling and offered to discuss alternatives to demolition with the owners. Sterling then contacted the owners who told him the building “lacked structural integrity.” On Jan. 30 the house was felled.

Under Houston’s new historic preservation ordinance, don’t owners of historic properties have to give the city 90 days notice before demolition? Only if the house is in a historic district; 1801 Ashland, in the heart of the Heights, was not. “Even though people think the Heights is a historic district, it’s not, so the city can’t even delay demolition,” says David Bush of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance.

About 80 percent of Houston’s historic homes are located in the Heights, Sterling says. Obtaining historic district status in a Houston neighborhood is difficult, he says, requiring at least 67 percent of property owners who own 51 percent of the land area within the proposed historic boundaries to sign a petition creating the district. Heights residents have not completed the process to have their neighborhood designated a Houston Historic District. Wouldn’t it be sweet irony if the Ashland House became the symbol they need to rally neighbors to create one?