

A HISTORY OF HAMMERSMITH

By Jerry Hill ¹

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If any property owner in Hammersmith should trace the title to their land they would find that it dates all the way back to an important original land grant from Mexico. Also, they would learn that one of the previous owners of their property was none other than Stephen F. Austin, a hero of the Texas revolution.

Austin was authorized by the Mexican governor to carry out a colonization enterprise under a grant originally issued to his father by the Spanish government before Mexico became a sovereign nation in 1821. To carry out the enterprise Austin was permitted to explore the coastal plain for the purpose of selecting a site for the proposed colony and bringing in 300 new settlers. He decided on the rich land that stretched northward from the Gulf of Mexico as far as the Old San Antonio Road and extended from the Lavaca River in the west to the San Jacinto River in the east.

The area of Austin's Colony included land that is now contained in 19 Texas counties. Austin was to collect 12½ cents an acre in compensation for his services to settle the land and he also received 23,000 acres of land for each 100 families settled within his colony. Between 1824 and 1828, Austin ultimately granted 297 titles under this contract. Each head of household received a minimum of 177 acres or 4,428 acres depending on whether they intended to farm or raise livestock.

Austin set up his base of operation in 1824 at San Felipe de Austin, located on the west bank of the Brazos River, and it became the

¹ Special thanks to our neighbors and original residents who contributed by sharing their memories. These include Fernando Segura, Myrna Klein, Carolyn Jones, Joe Upham, Jerry Potter, Elizabeth Binkley, Tom Eaton and Earl Vanzant.

unofficial capital of his colony. Austin had complete civil and military authority over his colonists, subject to rather nominal supervision by the Mexican officials at San Antonio and Monterrey. As lieutenant colonel of militia, he planned and sometimes led campaigns against the Indians.

One of the original settlers in Austin's colony was John D. Taylor who in August of 1824 was granted a deed for land practically centered on a landmark called "Pine Point" that was located at the southernmost turn of Buffalo Bayou as it passed through the property. "Pine Point" was the site of one of the few springs in the area and presumably referred to a point of pine trees growing along the bayou. It was near the present location of Lake Vargo.²

John D. Taylor's grant was a 4,428 acre league of land, square-shaped, that was about 2.6 miles on a side. He listed his occupation as farmer and stock raiser when he accepted it. His league encompassed the land that today would stretch west from just east of Voss Road to a point where Gessner Road intersects Westheimer Road and north from just below Westheimer Road to Taylorcrest. That would place Hammersmith in the southeastern corner of his property and all property owners in our subdivision have land titles based on that original grant from the Mexican government that Austin issued to John D. Taylor in 1824.

At the south side of Buffalo Bayou near "Pine Point" John Taylor constructed a house. He probably also built a bridge over the Bayou near the house to connect the north and south portions of his tract that was bisected by the stream. Pine Point was about one day's travel time from Harrisburg, the port on lower Buffalo Bayou, on the way to San Felipe. What became known as the San Felipe Trail was carved out of the coastal prairie and carried supplies overland from the port town westward to the new settlers in Austin's Colony. Some believe that "Pine Point" served as a rustic inn for travelers on that road. The road would have passed on a corridor between the current Westheimer Road and Buffalo Bayou, just to the south of Hammersmith's location.

² *The Road to Piney Point*. Edited by Melissa M. Peterson, City of Piney Point Village, TX, 1994.

In 1828 Taylor deeded his entire league to Stephen F. Austin, except for about 900 acres in the southwestern part of the league that included the house that Taylor had built. It is not known whether Austin actively lived at Pine Point after he bought it for his personal property but during this time he was significantly involved with efforts to gain Texas' independence. When war began at Gonzales on October 1, 1835 Austin was given the rank of general and elected to command the volunteers gathered there. He marched his troops west to meet the Mexicans at San Antonio but soon left in November when the provisional government elected him to serve as commissioner to the United States.

Austin arrived in New Orleans in January 1836 to assume his new duties and returned again to Texas in June, after independence had been won at the Battle of San Jacinto. Somewhat hesitantly, Austin consented to offer himself for the presidency after his return to Texas. He was defeated by Sam Houston in the election of September 1836, but accepted the office of Secretary of State from the successful candidate. He died in service at Columbia on December 27, 1836, at the untimely age of forty-three.

At the time of Austin's death he had large landholdings, many debts, and very little cash. In the ensuing settlement of the estate Austin's portion of the original Pine Point league was divided into lots. Stephen's cousin, Henry Austin, aided in the administration of the estate and received one of the lots. It was the southeast most portion of the original league consisting of a tract about 500 feet wide extending southward from Buffalo Bayou to about the present-day Westheimer Road. Within Henry Austin's tract is where Hammersmith was developed.

After the Texas revolution many people moved into the area west of Houston which was mostly open prairie. Small farms developed that were primarily used for producing cattle. Big plantations where cotton and other commercial crops were grown operated further west, along the Brazos River bottoms and further south, closer to the coast.

Near the end of the 1800s an influx of German and Italian farmers started to buy land in the western part of the county. They bought small tracts of about 20 acres and many of these were used to grow vegetable crops to feed the growing city of Houston. There were several sawmills operating in the area and a railroad line from Houston eventually came west through the country along a route now used by the West Park Tollway.



Hammersmith's location as seen from the air in 1944.

From the 1920s into the 1940s smaller tracts of this land started to be sold off as the second generation of owners grew tired of farming. After World War II Houston began expanding more rapidly westward into the rural farmland where owners were selling their agricultural land and the concept of planned subdivisions began to develop. One of the original developments was called Tanglewood, located about three miles outside of Houston. It was developed by William Farrington in 1949 and was characterized by large building lots. These large lots lent themselves to the development of sprawling ranch style homes.

The Sakowitz family, which operated a major department store downtown, saw an opportunity as the western suburbs began to grow and upscale homes started to be developed. They opened a second department store at the intersection of Westheimer and Post Oak in 1959.

Housing developments continued to grow westward with Briargrove being started in the 1950s. Other developments were platted out with similar names such as Briar Meadow, Briar Gate, and Briar Bend. Among these “Briars” were three neighborhoods with notable exceptions in their names. They were called Charnwood, Hammersmith, and Marble Arch. All were located in close proximity to each other. Charnwood was a neighborhood of single family residences where construction started in the 1950s. Marble Arch was a multi-building condominium development built in the mid 1960s just east of Voss Road, near Westheimer. Hammersmith consisted of conjoined townhomes where development also started in the mid 1960s. Interestingly, the names of all three of these neighborhoods are taken from locations in London. We do not know who started these developments but it’s a good bet that they had a tie back to England.

The Hammersmith subdivision takes its name from the borough of Hammersmith, which is located in West London. Marble Arch is the name of a well-known landmark near Hyde Park in London. There is also a street in London called Charnwood Road. Two of the short streets with London-related names in Hammersmith are only found in this location in Houston. Fulham Court was named for a borough of London that adjoins the Borough of Hammersmith and Amberly Court is named for a small town just outside of London.

The developers of Hammersmith wanted to build abutting townhouses but there was a restriction on this type of building in Houston because the city’s department that issued building permits was concerned about fire safety in flanking multi-story homes. There was no precedent and the city was reluctant to issue construction permits. Fernando Segura, a local architect and early Hammersmith resident, along with others,

worked with Houston's Building and Fire Departments to develop a design using an 8-inch firewall that could serve as a common wall between units. The firewall was to extend all the way from the foundation to above the roof and was supposed to delay any fire from penetrating to the other side for at least four hours.

After the city agreed to approve the concept for construction, the original plat of Hammersmith subdivision was filed on December 7, 1964. The 21-acre tract was divided into 226 individual lots with a private park or club area in the middle covering about ½ acre. The lots were originally arranged to be 25 to 25½ feet wide, except for a few end lots that were to be 30 feet wide where there was a curved entrance to an alleyway. The lots ranged from 90 to 100 feet deep.

Ultimately, some builders purchased multiple adjacent lots and adjusted the widths of some to be as narrow as 18 feet and as wide as 40 feet, with most remaining at the 25 foot size. The total number of lots finally became 223. Some of the builders who were putting up houses on adjacent lots would pour a single concrete slab for multiple foundations. Today one can view the backs of the foundations from the alleys and tell from the foundation seam which ones are abutting and which are continuous.

Hammersmith was platted evenly into two separate sections, Hammersmith 1 and Hammersmith 2, with the dividing line running east-west down Chevy Chase, through the swimming pool area and across Fulham. The two sections are mirror images of each other with H.S. #1 on the north side and H.S. #2 on the south side. On the plats the common area is divided into two pieces of property owned by the association. The appraisal district has presently assigned the north side of the common area in H.S.#1 a market value of \$700,000 while the south side in H.S. #2 has a value of \$120,000. The appraised value for tax purposes is \$100 each.

At the time of development, the original land owners consisted of the Leggett-Cutbirth-Winston Corporation; Joseph Eckman, a builder; and G.R. Jackson; serving as trustee for other interests. The original developers constructed streets and installed utilities based on the plat with the first homes starting to be built a couple of years later. The land Hammersmith was built upon was not necessarily ideal for home construction because the soil type is listed on the Harris County soil survey as being *Lake Charles Clay*, which covers much of west Houston. The clay soil has a high shrink and swell capacity, which can contribute to cracked foundation slabs if they are not installed correctly. Fortunately, for construction purposes, Hammersmith is conveniently outside the 100-year flood plain and not situated on any of Houston's notorious fault lines.

On March 29th, 1965, the State of Texas issued a Certificate of Incorporation to the Hammersmith Community Improvement Association (HCIA), pursuant to the provisions of the Texas Non-Profit Corporation Act. About a week later, on April 7th, 1965, an organizational meeting of the Board of Directors was held. The entire membership of the board consisted of G. R. Jackson, Evelyn Lee, and Sidney Wright. Jackson was elected President, Lee was the Vice-President, and Wright was Secretary-Treasurer. The first order of business was to adopt a set of by-laws for the association.

A set of deed restrictions and covenants was registered in the county records in June of 1966. Among other things the restrictions limited Hammersmith to being residential-only townhouses of at least two stories, established the minimum size for dwellings at 1800 square feet, and established an architectural control committee. The committee had authority to approve plans and specifications, materials, grade elevation, and to insure "harmony of external design with existing structures."

In the deed restrictions arrangements were also made to initially assess homeowners for an annual maintenance charge that was set by the HCIA at \$10 per month. This amount provided for not only such items as lawn

and pool maintenance, but there was also 24-hour security. The deed restrictions allowed the association to adjust the dues from year to year but originally put a ceiling on them by including the statement that "in no event shall the charge be raised above \$10.00 per lot per month." About 1962 Lee High School was opened to serve students in the growing western section of Houston and it developed into one of the most highly regarded schools in the city. That contributed to the desirability of Hammersmith and many children of the early residents in the subdivision graduated from Lee.

In the mid 1960s, Voss Road was a quiet two-lane street lined with grass ditches to carry storm water. Much of the land in this part of the city still had a rural quality where some residents kept horses and riding stables operated. The only businesses between Westheimer and San Felipe were Cornelius Nursery and a veterinarian at the corner of Del Monte and Voss. Hammersmith eventually became neighbored by a great deal of commercial development.

Construction in Hammersmith started along the east end of Del Monte about 1965 and progressed westward from Voss Road. Jim West, a realtor, was involved early in the development of homes along Del Monte. He had a sales office on Del Monte that was initially in a trailer and then he put the office in one of the houses. There was a model home on the north side of Del Monte at Voss Road and the first houses were built adjacent to it.

Charter Properties was one of the original agents for the sale of lots and houses in Hammersmith. Their offices were located on Del Monte, across Voss Road from the development. The location is now occupied by the Far East Chinese restaurant. A "spec" house that was built at 7525 Chevy Chase served as their on-site sales office. Several builders purchased groups of lots and built more "spec" homes. When these houses were sold the builders would purchase additional lots and continue building.

The construction in the houses was considered to be high quality and architects included fine details in their designs. Only the best quality lumber was used for building. The initial homes that were built in the mid to late 1960s sold for prices in the high \$30,000 to low \$40,000 range, while a 22-foot wide lot cost \$8,050. This was at a time when a 3 or 4-bedroom tract home in Houston could be bought for \$20,000 to \$30,000, so Hammersmith homes were definitely “high-end.”

Several different builders constructed “spec” houses in Hammersmith. A listing prepared in late 1968 showed 20 houses available for sale. There was a veritable smorgasbord for prospective buyers to pick from. On the listing of the homes the selling prices ranged from about \$57,500 to \$68,500. If someone wanted to buy a lot and engage their own builder, a lot 25 feet wide could be purchased for \$9,750 then with larger sizes available for an additional \$390 per front foot.

Jerry Potter and her husband were the first to build in the 7600 block of Del Monte. In 1967 they picked out a lot on the north side of the street and engaged builder Joe Eckman to construct their three-story townhouse. Afterwards, when asked why they picked that particular lot to build on in the midst of an empty block, Jerry said it was because there was a nice brick wall behind the house across the alleyway – which she admitted to later backing her car into and knocking down.

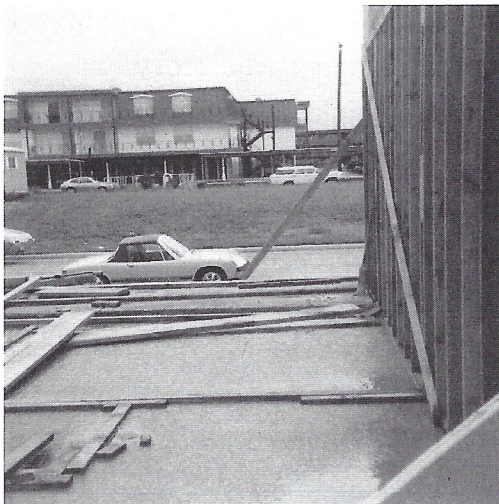
Some of the early homes built in the 7500 block of Del Monte had carports, instead of enclosed garages. The carports all had corrugated metal roofs. Owners eventually converted their carports to closed garages but the metal roofs are still in evidence.

Among the initial builders was architect Fernando Segura, who built the first five homes on the south side of Del Monte and occupied the house at 7503. Other builders included Betty Mitchell, Joe Eckman, Ernest Rowe, and Fred Lewis. Joe Eckman collaborated with architect Lucian Hood on several of his houses, while Segura served as his own architect. Eckman lived in several of the houses he built here and is also well

known for homes he built in Tanglewood and River Oaks. Joe Upham was the resident salesman for Charter Properties, which represented several of the builders, and he manned their sales office at 7525 Chevy Chase. Since Joe's home was next door at 7523 Chevy Chase, he had probably the shortest commute to work of anyone who lived in the development.

Most of the townhomes were initially sought out by families who had lived in the Memorial area and sold larger properties after their children had left home. Hammersmith was generally always an adult-prone community although a few families raised their children here.

Building of new townhomes progressed along Del Monte back to Fulham Court and then into the center area along Chevy Chase by 1968. Construction along Olympia was slower and many of the homes on that street were completed later.



Picture of a home under construction on the north side of Olympia in the 7500 block. Note the empty lot across the street on the south side of Olympia and the apartment building beyond.

By 1990 only three vacant lots were remaining in Hammersmith. Over the following years homes were built on two of those but one empty lot remained at 7502 Chevy Chase. Finally, in 2014 Brad and Claudia Dorsey constructed a home on that last lot, which was located directly across the alley from the house that Fernando Segura had started in

1965. It took almost exactly 50 years to complete Hammersmith from the time the first house until the last house was built.

While building of new homes was ongoing the new residents already in their homes became upset with the original trustees of the home owners association (HCIA) because of the uncontrolled inconveniences caused by the construction activity. So, in August, 1969 five residents founded a parallel association and obtained a charter from the state for a non-profit corporation called the Hammersmith Civic Club (HCC). The deed restrictions of HCIA had only three directors accountable to the homeowners, but the new HCC saw the need for fuller representation on a board of directors. The HCC officers outlined the individual districts that we now know and as homes were built in them directors were elected to the board to represent each of the districts.

The following committees were formed by the Civic Club: Audit, Membership & Roster, By Laws, Swimming Pool, and Beautification. Also the HCC allowed two votes per property owned. One spouse could vote one way and the other could vote the other way! On August 20, 1969, the next day after formation of the club, the developers sold the pool to the HCC for the sum of "\$10.00 and other considerations." Pool use dues were set at \$5.00 per month and hours of use were posted to be Monday through Friday from 3 to 8 PM, Saturday, Sunday and holidays from 10:00 AM to 12:00 midnight. Use at other hours cost an additional \$10.00. Enforcement of hours was on an honor system.

At one meeting of the club the question was raised as to whether residents of Section 2 should be allowed to have the same swimming privileges as the residents of Section 1. Fortunately, all were allowed to swim in the pool.

Because the pool was not technically owned by a homeowners association at that time an annual franchise tax of \$57.27 had to be paid. There was one more problem. There was no fence between Hammersmith and the apartments to the south from where visitors

would sneak over to enjoy the water without actually having swimming privileges. So on February 21, 1970 HCC borrowed \$25,000 from Colonial Savings Association to build a pool house and subsequently a wooden fence around the pool. The original design for the clubhouse included a Swedish style hot sauna but during the first year of operation the cost of electricity to heat it was so high that the sauna was removed. Eventually, in the mid or late 1980s, the wooden fence was replaced with the current open metal fence that allows more air circulation and provides a more appealing view of the common area.

On May 1, 1975, after six years of parallel operation, the Hammersmith Civic Club was dissolved and officially took over the operation of the Hammersmith Community Improvement Association. The concept of the board of directors with a representative on the board from each district was maintained. Thus came about the transition of supervision and governance of Hammersmith from the developers to the resident owners. Gerald E. Veltman, who lived at 7628 Del Monte, served as the President during this transition, from 1973 until 1980.

One of the unique features of Hammersmith is the gaslights that illuminate the neighborhood. But these were threatened in 1978 when a new federal law, the Power Plant and Industrial Fuel Use Act, was passed by Congress after the Arab oil boycott. That act prohibited local natural gas distribution companies from providing service for use in outdoor lighting in the United States. In 1981, before the law went into effect, Gerald Veltman wrote a letter to Congressman Robert Young (D-MO) who inserted an amendment into the law that grandfathered all gas lights for subdivisions that had them in use prior to the act being passed.

Several well-known Houstonians have lived in Hammersmith over the years. Warner Roberts, who lived on Olympia, was a local television personality and talk-show host. Also in the television business was resident Jim Masucci, who lived on Fulham Court and was president of KTRK television, Channel 13.

The neighborhood seemed to particularly attract people in the restaurant industry. Those included Erik Worscheh, who managed the restaurant at the famous Shamrock Hotel; Camille Berman and her son Ron who owned Maxim's restaurant; Clive Berkman, who operated Charley's 517 restaurant downtown for several years; and Adriano Farinola, who operated Pino's restaurant at Westheimer and Hillcroft with his brother, Pino.

Hammersmith was apparently photogenically appealing to some motion picture and television producers because filming was done for at least two productions in our neighborhood. One was shot at a townhouse on Olympia and the other on location in Olympia Court.

Hammersmith gained some mention in the printed media too. Author David Lindsey, who lives in Austin and writes popular mystery novels, used Hammersmith as the setting for one of the scenes in his 1990 book titled *Mercy*. In the book a fictional murder takes place in one of the townhomes and a Houston police detective responds to the scene. The author describes Hammersmith as follows:

"The Hammersmith complex ... was a mingle of small wooded lanes where the buildings were joined together like row houses, different styles and colors butted up against each other in an imperfect harmony, their various rooflines and chimneys bouncing up and down like the individual notes on a musical score."

One of the ubiquitous things among residential developments in Texas are home owner associations and ours, the Hammersmith Community Improvement Association, has served our development well. While some home owners consider such associations to be an impediment to rightful enjoyment of their property, they actually serve a useful purpose, especially in Houston. Our city's absence of zoning laws would likely allow for indiscriminant development if it were not for the deed restrictions that home owner's associations are allowed to enforce. Home owner's associations also undertake the operation of many community

responsibilities, such as maintenance of common areas, managing of the swimming pool, and lawn grooming. In Hammersmith, maintenance of the gas lights places an additional responsibility on the association.

The burden of facility maintenance forces many community associations to engage a management company to oversee these functions, with a concurrent addition to the membership's dues. Since its inception Hammersmith has had a self-managed community association where the property owners contribute their time and participate actively in the management of the association. This is done through the Board of Directors and individual committees, all of which are staffed by volunteers. This spirit of participation not only brings the members of the community closer together but it has helped to maintain reasonable annual dues collected by the association.