

City of McKinney

Historic Building Marker Application

(Supporting Documentation)

The Willis R. Dowell House 700 W. Virginia Street



A. Alterations & Construction

Construction

The Willis R. Dowell House, constructed around 1913, is a single-story, wood-frame residential structure built on a pier-and-beam foundation. The house has a hip roof and porches on the east and south side accented with boxed eaves and square columns. Pine flooring is used throughout the asymmetrical floor plan, though the living room floor is currently overlaid with carpeting. The house is fenestrated with large one-over-one double-hung windows. The home's design follows a vernacular style with Prairie Style influences. The home's current form is the result of an early, 20th-Century remodeling of a much older structure.

Alterations

Willis Dowell contracted with W.J. Higgins to enlarge the existing three-room home that existed on the site perhaps as early as the 1880s. The front of this earlier house faced North Bradley Street and had a broad porch with a centrally located door flanked by sidelights. By adding a new porch to the south, the enlarged structure was reoriented to face Virginia Street. Willis Dowell had Mr. Higgins add a living room that connected to a dining room through a wide hall. Additional living space was added to the west, though this may have been used as a sleeping porch.

This new configuration remained unchanged for decades and despite the new orientation to Virginia Street, the home's official address remained 203 N. Bradley until the early 1940s. It was not until 1979, that any significant alterations were made to the house. These changes consisted of the addition of a new bathroom and enclosure of a portion of the west side of the house.

Anticipated Needs

The current owner, who was involved with the earlier changes made in the late 1970s, does not anticipate making any changes to the house.

B. Historical Figures

Dowell Family Background

In 1856, Francis Dowell and his wife left Tennessee and arrived in McKinney with three sons and a nephew. Their eldest son James started an implements business which became J.P. Hardware. Their other sons, Willis and Francis, Jr. worked the family farm a few miles west of town. Their nephew Jonathan became a Captain in the Confederate Army and was wounded and captured at the Battle of Gettysburg. Upon Jonathan's return to McKinney after the war, he engaged in farming and livestock trade.

The Dowell's had large families. In the 1880s, when the population was around 1,500, there were at least three dozen Dowells living in McKinney. That's about 2.5% of the town's population. With such large families, giving distinct names to children might be a challenge. However, the Dowells did not seem to mind duplications. In fact, the James Patterson Dowell who started the hardware store had a son named James Patterson Dowell. Willis Dowell (the brother of the elder James Patterson Dowell) also named one of his sons James Patterson Dowell, who later had a son he named James Patterson Dowell. For nearly 30 years there were three James Patterson Dowells living in McKinney at the same time.

SPECIAL NOTE: The youngest of these J.P. Dowell men was frequently referred to as Jim Pat, but not always. The names of these men make researching and writing about them challenging. However, for the sake of clarity these men will be referred to as follows:

James P. = J.P. Dowell, who started the hardware store.

James P. Jr. = the son of the hardware merchant

Jim Dowell = the cotton merchant, son of Willis Dowell

Jim Pat = the son of the cotton merchant Jim Dowell

Willis Robert Dowell (1852-1927) "Farmer"

Willis R. Dowell was born to parents Francis Dowell and Carolyn Doss at Lebanon, Tennessee in 1852. When he was four years old, the Dowell family moved to McKinney setting just north of where the First Methodist Church at the corner of Lamar and Church Street now stands. Within about a year of the family's arrival, Francis purchase land west of town and began farming the area around what is now the intersection of Harding and El Dorado Streets. In 1870, Willis married Susan Thomas. Their marriage gave rise to the birth of eleven children.

In 1906, when Willis was 54 years old, their farmhouse was completely destroyed by fire. Subsequently, he moved his family to a three-room home at the corner of Virginia and Bradley but maintained the farm while living in town.

Willis Dowell was the youngest of three brothers who arrive in McKinney with their father Francis. The oldest brother, James P. Dowell, began an implement business in 1870 which became the J.P. Dowell Hardware Store on East Louisiana Street near the McKinney Square. Willis' other brother, Francis, Jr., lived and worked on the family farm west of town.

According to the *McKinney Democrat-Gazette*, Willis was "a well-known figure of our county, a successful farmer and stockman." He was a member of the Mason's St. John's Lodge #51 and after an extended illness of about four years received full rites at the time of his death in 1927. His funeral was heavily attended by the residents in and around McKinney.

James Patterson Dowell, Sr. (1882-1953) "Cotton Trader"

Jim Dowell was born in McKinney in 1882, son of Willis R. Dowell and Susan A. Thomas. After attending McKinney public schools, Jim worked for a while as a Pullman car conductor between Dallas and San Antonio. By 1909, he was living near Abilene working as a sales agent representing cotton firm C.F. Witherspoon & Sons of Galveston. That year, he closed two large cotton deals in Hamlin, Texas totaling over \$130,000. Hamlin, about 50 miles northwest of Abilene, became an active agricultural center following the arrival of two rail lines around 1906.

Around 1913, Jim left Abilene and returned to McKinney. A year later, he partnered with his brother Alfred to form the cotton trading firm of the Dowell Brothers. Their office was located on the second floor of the building now occupied by Me and Mrs. Jones on the east side of the Square. In 1915, the new firm exported a significant shipment of cotton to a buyer in England. On May 1 at a New York City pier, the stock was loaded aboard a ship bound for Liverpool, England. The ship was the Lusitania and on May 7 it was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat, killing 1,198 (128 American) passengers and resulting in a complete loss of the Dowell Brothers shipment. The incident was one of the key factors that led the United States to enter the war against Germany in World War I. Back in McKinney, the loss nearly bankrupt the Dowells brothers.

In 1923, when Jim was 41 years old he married the 28-year-old Christelle ONeal

in a private ceremony witnessed only by members of both families. Christelle was the daughter of George Oneal, a traveling salesman for the Cincinnati Cloak & Suit Company, and Jeanette Edmonds of McKinney. Christelle was known as a talented musician and a charter member of the Jeanne d'Arc Club, a literary social organization. The McKinney Courier-Gazette writes glowingly of her:

Her beauty, personality and magnetism has always made her popular in every circle of McKinney and since quite a young girl, she as been a favorite in the social circle in McKinney, St. Louis, Oklahoma and elsewhere... She is sweet and sincere, an interesting conversationalist, and gifted in the domestic arts. She has a large coterie of friends throughout the state who will be interested in her happiness.

Following their wedding, the couple spent several weeks honeymooning in Carlsbad, New Mexico. They returned to McKinney where they lived with Christelle's parents on South Tennessee Street, eventually returning to the Bradley Street home after a fire destroyed the Oneal home in 1936.

In 1953, Jim died of a heart attack at the age of 71. Christelle passed away in 1979 at the age of 84. Both are buried in the Dowell plot at the Pecan Grove Cemetery.

James Patterson Dowell, Jr. (1924-1998) "Electrical Engineer"

The fourth James Patterson Dowell to become a resident of McKinney was born to cotton dealer Jim Dowell and Christelle Oneal in 1924. Jim Pat, as he was called, was born nine months and three days following his parent's wedding.

Jim Pat excelled academically in McKinney schools, achieving honor-roll status when he was in the sixth grade. He graduated from McKinney High School with an average of 94.44, second only to Miss Ouita Taylor's 94.50 average.

Following graduation, Jim Pat enrolled at Southern Methodist University and in 1943 became one of three sophomores to be initiated into Kappa Mu Epsilon, a national honorary mathematics fraternity. Jim Pat received a B.S degree in electrical engineering from SMU in three-and-half years with highest honors.

With the United States embroiled in World War II, Jim Pat enter Navy in September of 1944. He received his basic training in San Deigo and later attended radar and radio training in Chicago. He received his commission as ensign in January of 1945.

After the end of WWII, Jim Pat attended Harvard University and received a Masters Degree in electrical engineering. He then returned to Texas to live in Dallas where he taught at SMU and worked as a manufacture's sales rep in the electrical engineering trade. In 1973, he married Patsy Ruth Cox, daughter of Wliley Cox and Ruby Cooper of Oklahoma. The couple lived in Dallas until Jim Pat's mother Christelle died in 1979. At that time, the couple move to McKinney and occupied the house on Bradley Street that Jim Pat grew up in.

C. Property Ownership

Address: 700 W. Virginia Street, McKinney, Texas 75069
(a.k.a. 203 North Bradley in earlier years)

Legal Description: McKinney Outlots, Lot 575

Purchase Date	Seller	Buyer	Book/Page
7/31/1855	State of Texas	Thomas T. Bradley	I/370
8/3/1874	Thomas T. Bradley	Hugo & Maggie Smith	X/233
9/20/1877	Hugo & Maggie Smith	A.B. & Ella Price	11/590
8/30/1880	A.B. & Ella Price	V.T. & A.J. Chew	9/167
8/19/1881	V.T. & A.J. Chew	E.J. Harris	9/501
Mar. 26, 1889	E.J. Harris	W.H. Lehr	38/628
Jun. 11, 1892	W.H. Lehr	Aaron Bryant	53/214
Jun. 30, 1904	Aaron Bryant	W.H. Rogers	124/422
Feb. 25, 1905	W.H. Rogers	Aaron Bryant	133/266
Apr. 6, 1906	Aaron Bryant	W.G. Rogers	140/72
Dec. 22, 1906	W.G. Rogers	W.R. Dowell	142/589
Jun. 10, 1914	W.R. Dowell	J.P. Dowell	181/402

D. Tenant History

Mrs. Nellie Hall was a tenant in 1933. The house was available for rent from 1933 until 1936. It is not known if other tenants lived in the house during that time.