

THE ISAAC HEFFRON HOUSE

I. CONTEXT

The city of Galveston occupies a barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico. After the Texas Revolution, a group of investors led by Michel Menard formed the Galveston City Company, which platted the land and began selling lots in 1838. Throughout the nineteenth century, the city grew on the strength of the port as a medium for cotton exports and farm supply imports. By 1900, Galveston served as a center of banking for the southwestern United States.

The East End Historic District, on the northeastern portion of the island, reflects the city's growth during the late nineteenth century. During this era, when Galveston government and business leaders built large and architecturally significant dwellings, they most often did so in the East End. The list of Galveston figures who built houses in the neighborhood during this period includes wharf president John L. Darragh, state legislator Walter Gresham, industrialists Gustav and John Reymerschoffer, merchants John C. Trube and H.A. Landes, county treasurer James S. Waters,¹ and contractor and city alderman Isaac Heffron, whose residence at 1509 Post Office is the subject of this application.

II. OVERVIEW

Isaac Heffron was born in Cardiff, Wales to I. Heffron and Miriam Courtney in either 1853 or 1858 and immigrated to Galveston at a young age.² In 1876, he married Clotilde Gillett, who was born in 1858 in Texas to French parents.³ Isaac and Clotilde had four children, William, Clotilde, Laura, and Norine.⁴ In 1881, when Isaac purchased the property at 1509 Post Office, he was a stevedore with Munn, Fry, and Company. He stayed with the company until 1885, by which point it had been renamed Fry and Heffron. The company kept an office on 21st Street between Strand and Mechanic in downtown Galveston.⁵

As Heffron's career developed, he began to take on major projects and was awarded substantial contracts by the city of Galveston. He was responsible for the construction of a railroad connecting

Galveston to La Porte, which included a trestle bridge between Galveston Island and Virginia Point. He installed Galveston's first sewage system, as well as that of Houston. He was also part of the firm that built Galveston's first municipal water works system.⁶ Heffron's projects helped improve sanitation in the city after several outbreaks of infectious disease during the nineteenth century.⁷

During this period, he served on the city board of alderman and was president of both Galveston Sewer Company and Galveston Cement Pipeworks. He was vice president and general manager of the North Galveston, Houston, and Kansas City Railroad. He also continued to serve as a general contractor.⁸

Early in his marriage to Clotilde, and prior to the bulk of his late nineteenth-century success, Isaac purchased the lot at 1509 Post Office. The first documented owner of that lot had been Josephine Levitre in 1856.⁹ In December 1856, Josephine, already divorced from her first husband Michael Levitre, married William G. Casseady.¹⁰ Upon Josephine's death in December 1873, the house became vacant and in 1875 the property was the subject of a lawsuit between Henry A. Levitre, son of Josephine from her first marriage, and "J. Snowden," likely Josephine Snowden, the daughter of Josephine Casseady and sister of Henry A. Levitre.¹ The judge in the case ruled that Joseph Franklin, an "investigator of titles,"¹¹ would be appointed the commissioner in charge of selling and disposing lots 4 and 5 of block 435.¹² In the following year, Henry A. Levitre purchased lot 5 from Franklin for \$2250. Shortly thereafter, David Fahey acquired the property from Levitre and then sold it to Heffron in October 1881 for \$2750.¹³

The property's insurance record lists the building's original date of construction as 1890 and the architectural style of the house matches other examples from this time period.¹⁴ However, bird's eye views from 1871 and 1885 and Sanborn maps from 1889 and 1899 indicate that Heffron could have incorporated parts of an earlier building into the 1890 house.

¹ In addition to Josephine Levitre's marriage to William Casseady in 1856, there is documentation of a marriage between a Josephine Levitre and George Snowden in 1859. As Josephine and William Casseady continue to live together throughout the 1860s, it appears unlikely that there had been a divorce between 1856 and 1859. The Josephine that married George Snowden in 1859 was likely Josephine Casseady's daughter from her first marriage to Michel Levitre in 1840. Josephine Casseady's mother was also named Josephine and she lived in Galveston until her death after 1880. (1880 census)

Camille N. Drie's 1871 bird's eye view of Galveston shows a one-story, three-bay, side-gable house on the lot. There is a one-story secondary building oriented perpendicularly behind the main house.¹⁵ The lot is partially obscured in Augustus Koch's 1885 bird's eye view, but the visible features of the house are similar to those found in the 1871 image.¹⁶ The pre-1890 building is most clearly documented in the 1889 Sanborn Map, which shows a one-story dwelling with a central front porch and a secondary building connected on the rear (south) facade.¹⁷ As these details are consistent with the 1871 and 1885 images, it is possible that the building on the lot in 1889, which Isaac and Clotilde Heffron inhabited, had been built by Josephine and William Casseady before 1871.

The 1899 Sanborn Map reflects the changes that Heffron made to the property as his business career developed. The new house, dated to 1890 in the insurance record,¹⁸ sits in the same footprint as the old house, with the exception of a bay window on the eastern portion of the front (north) facade and a new porch running the length of the rear facade. The most substantial difference is that the new building was two stories.¹⁹ Raising and adding stories to buildings was a common building practice in Galveston during this period and the similarities in the layout of the 1889 building and the 1899 building indicate the possibility that Isaac Heffron utilized this strategy.²

The 1890 house is two-story, four-bay urban Victorian house with turned columns, decorative porch detailing, a two-story tri-partite bay window, and double doors opening to a central passage with rooms on either side. Compared to other noted examples of the period in the East End, the decorative elements of the house are restrained. Its placement on a constrained urban lot between other houses limited Heffron's ability to employ other common Victorian elements, such as turrets and wrap-around porches.

The tall first floor two-over-two windows are characteristic of late 19th century features and they are indicative of the use of the porch as an extended living space in our subtropical climate. The tall shutters

² Another possibility is that Heffron completely demolished the existing building and constructed a new house in the same footprint. The available evidence is insufficient to assert or refute the incorporation of an earlier building into the 1890 Isaac Heffron House.

helped to protect against storms and to reduce heat gain, both important factors in the Texas Gulf Coast climate. The rear, south-facing porch illustrated in the 1899 Sanborn Map is typical of north-facing houses that sought to capture breezes from the Gulf of Mexico. While there is no evidence that Heffron hired an architect for the project, the lot bears signs of his personal influence as a contractor, most notably in the concrete balustrade along the front of the house. As an experienced cement contractor, he would have been capable of carrying out such an elaborate design.

The Heffron family lived in the house through the 1890s as Isaac's career continued to advance. In 1899, he commissioned architect C.W. Bulger to design a new house at 511 17th Street.²⁰ The family moved into the new house in 1901. 1509 Post Office had various tenants until the family transferred the deed to Andrew C. Falligant, husband of Isaac's daughter Clotilde. The Falligants lived in the house until October 1913, when they sold it to Thomas J. Holbrook.²¹ Isaac Heffron died in his office in 1928. As was written in his obituary in the Galveston Daily News,

"Mr. Heffron took a prominent part in the development of Galveston. He was an enthusiastic and tireless worker in the upbuilding of the city."²²

Thomas J. Holbrook was born in Salado, Texas in 1878. From 1907 to 1919, he was a credit manager for Mistrot Bros. in Galveston. After a two-year stay in Dallas, he returned in Galveston in 1921 and was elected state senator in 1922. During his stay in office from 1922 to 1939, he was involved in the construction of a causeway built in 1930 to connect the island to the mainland and in the addition of a psychiatric hospital to the University of Texas Medical Branch campus. The house at 1509 Post Office was his Galveston home for the duration of his tenure.²³ In 1940, Holbrook sold the building to Edmund Cordray, a pharmacist who had operated ran business at the corner of Post Office and 15th Street since 1918. Cordray used the house as a rental property until his death in 1965.²⁴

The house had several different owners through the 1970s and 1980s until it was purchased by Paul and Barbara Evans in 1990. The Evans' undertook a substantial rehabilitation project, which included the replacement of damaged historic porch spindles with spindles salvaged from the Joseph L. Darragh House during its 1992 demolition, the removal of paint from interior woodwork, and the replacement of damaged cypress siding with matching materials from architectural salvage sources.²⁵ The current owners, David and Sandra Fortenberry, purchased the house from the Evans' in 2010.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The two areas of significance for the East End National Historic Landmark District are architecture and outstanding community leaders.²⁶ In Edmund Cordray, Thomas J. Holbrook, and Isaac Heffron, the house has association with three significant figures in Galveston's history. Cordray was for over forty years the owner of a pharmacy in the East End. Holbrook, as a state senator, facilitated projects that helped to shape Galveston in the early twentieth century. Most significant is Isaac Heffron, who was responsible for major infrastructure projects during Galveston's greatest period of growth and was celebrated as an outstanding community leader at the time of his death.²⁷

The house, as a restrained example of the urban Victorian style popular in Galveston during the period, typifies the architectural character of the East End Historic District. Even after several ownership changes in the twentieth century, it retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. Through the thoughtful rehabilitation project led by Paul and Barbara Evans and the careful stewardship by Howard David and Sandra Fortenberry, mid-century changes to the house's interior have been reversed. The house's scale, siding, windows, and relationship to the street are all preserved.

IV. ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1 - The headstone of Josephine Casseady at Old City Cemetery, Galveston.



Figure 2 - The Cordray Drug Store at 1501 Post Office.

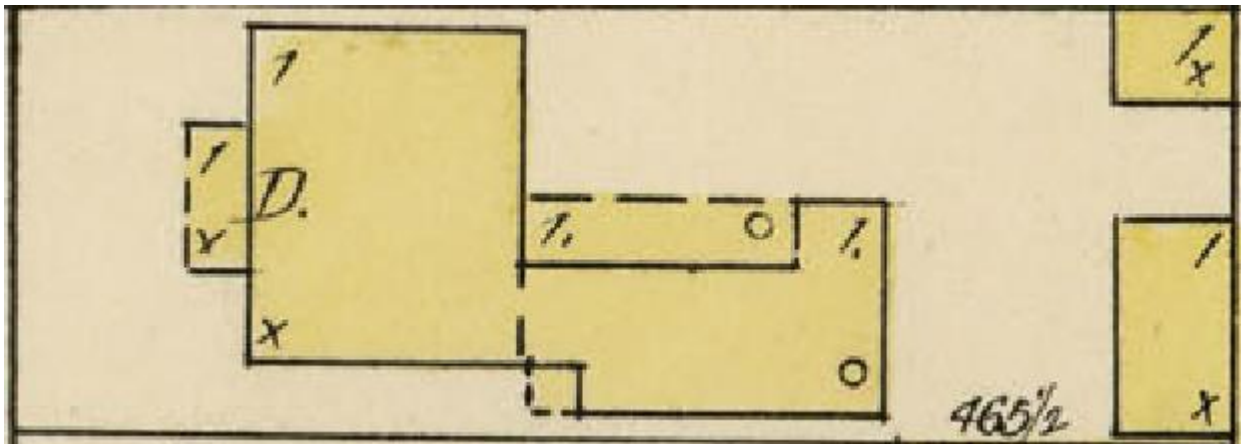


Figure 3 – Block 435 of Galveston in the 1871 bird's eye view, with 1509 Post Office indicated.

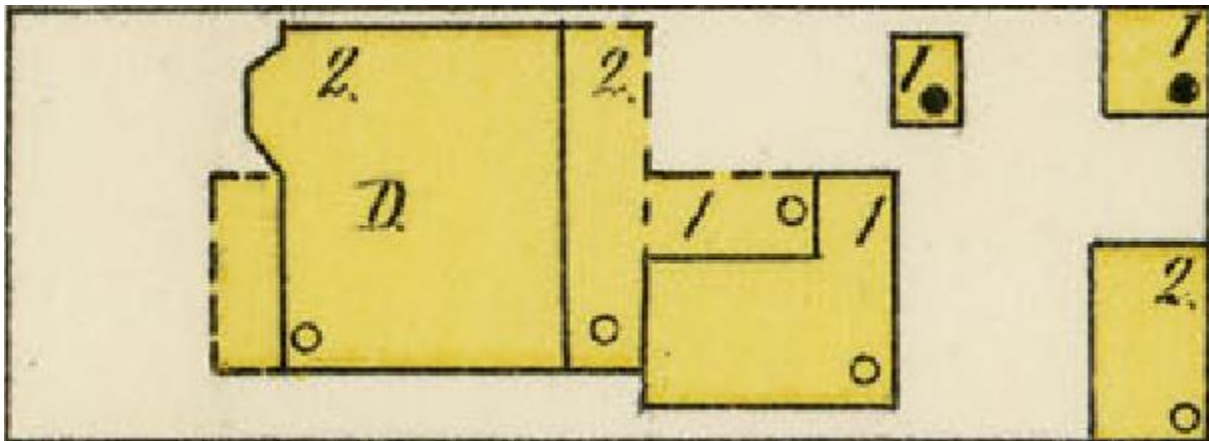


Figure 4 – Block 435 in the 1885 bird's eye view of Galveston, with 1509 Post Office indicated.

1889 footprint



1899 footprint



1912 footprint

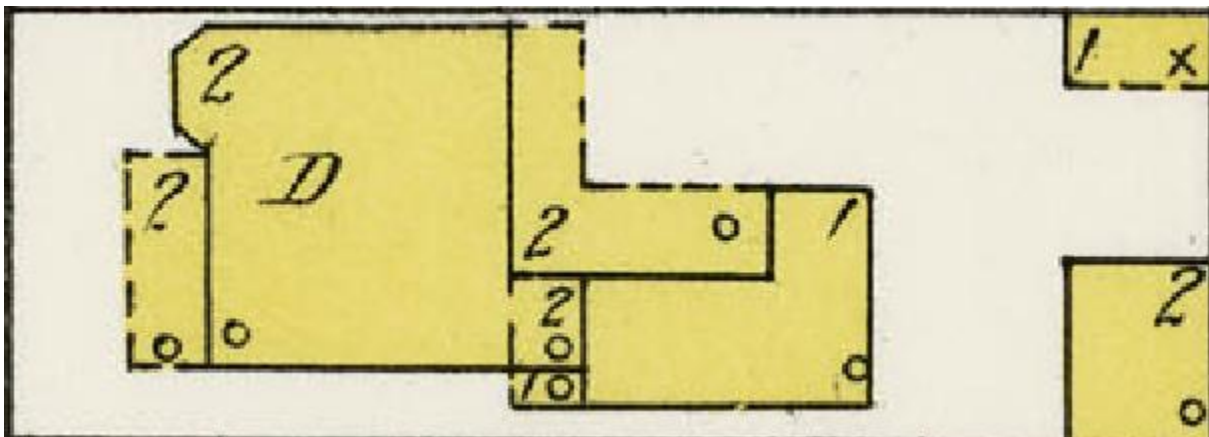


Figure 5 - Comparisons of the 1509 Post Office lot on Sanborn maps of 1889, 1899, and 1912.



Figure 6 - The Isaac Heffron House, 2013.



Figure 7 - The Isaac Heffron House, 2013.

V. SOURCES

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⁶ "Heffron Services to be Held Today." *The Galveston Daily News*; Friday, August 10, 1928, *Newspaper Archive* Web. 3 November 2015.

⁷ "Heffron Services to be Held Today." *The Galveston Daily News*.

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⁹ "Galveston City Directory, 1856-1857." Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), Galveston, Texas.

¹⁰ "Texas, County Marriage Index, 1837-1977, William G. Casseady and Josephine Levitre, December 17, 1856." Database. *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:F6B3-WZ2>: accessed 13 November 2015). Galveston, Texas, United States.

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¹² Cause #8265. December 7, 1875. Galveston County Clerk's Office, Galveston, Texas.

¹³ "Real Estate Transfers." *The Galveston Daily News*; Friday, October 16, 1881, *Newspaper Archive* Web. 3 November 2015.

¹⁴ Insurance Record for 1509 Post Office, Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

¹⁵ Drie, Camille N. Bird's Eye View of Galveston, 1871. Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation.

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- ¹⁶ Koch, Augustus. Bird's Eye View of Galveston, 1885. Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation.
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- ²⁷ "Heffron Services to be Held Today." *The Galveston Daily News*; Friday, August 10, 1928, *Newspaper Archive* Web. 3 November 2015.