

the utopian

ART WORKS 68 of 80

Art and community in Mart, Texas

A SOCIAL WORK PRECURSOR

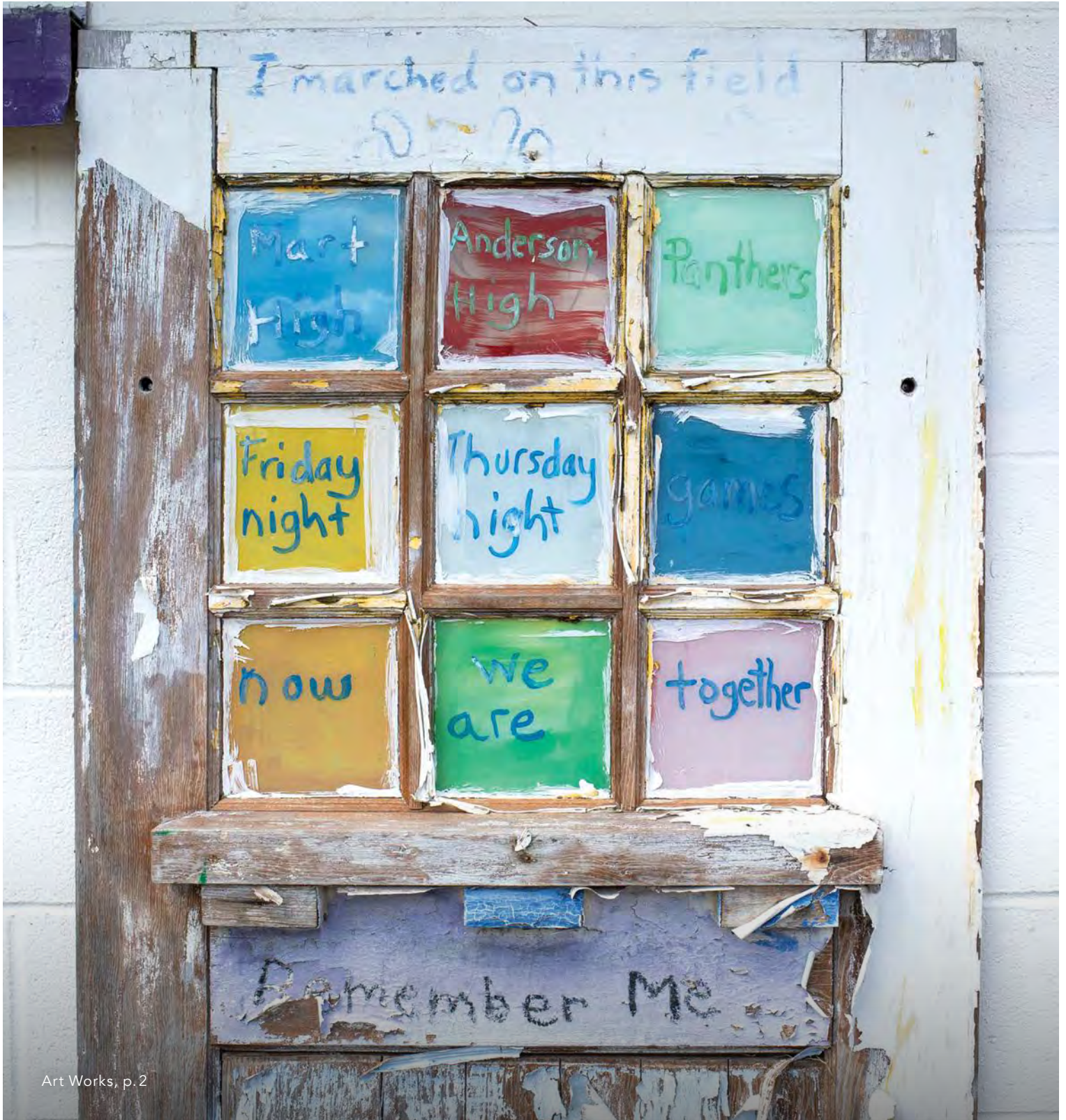
Thelma Mitchell Elliott, MSSW '54

RENACER IN OAXACA

Partnerships for maternal health

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN | STEVE HICKS SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

FALL 2018



FROM THE DEAN

"IN A SENSE, MY PARENTS WERE LUCKY THAT THEIR INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE WAS DISMISSED AS SOMETHING 'PUERTO RICANS DO.' DURING OUR COUNTRY'S PAINFUL PERIOD OF LEGALLY ENFORCED RACIAL SEGREGATION, OTHERS WERE NOT SO LUCKY."

It was my father's aspiration to forge a future for his children that led to his enlistment in the U.S. Army. In 1956, after the Korean War, his assignment took us from a small town in Puerto Rico to a new home in Richmond, Virginia. My father was a dark-skinned biracial Puerto Rican (white father, black mother), and my mother was white. Their interracial marriage was rather typical in the island, and I didn't think much of it.

Years later I understood that their marriage was rather remarkable in the mainland. I asked my mother one day about their arrival in Virginia, a state where "miscegenation" was actually a felony. She replied matter-of-factly, "Oh, as soon as people heard your father and me speaking Spanish, they brushed it off. To them we were foreigners, and they thought that's what 'they' do."

In a sense, my parents were lucky that their interracial marriage was dismissed as something "Puerto Ricans do." During our country's painful period of legally enforced racial segregation, others were not so lucky.

Many fought, in many ways, for the end of legalized segregation. I have shared in other communications that our building used to house a junior high school that led desegregation in Austin. This issue brings you the story of Thelma Mitchell Elliott, a graduate from our program and one of the Precursors, the first generation of black students that desegregated the university in the early 1950s.

Despite the Civil Rights Act of 1964, segregation and discrimination against people of color and vulnerable populations persist — we see it in police shootings of African American men; detention and separation of asylum-seeking families; the consequences of eating, barbecuing or doing ordinary things "while black."

Social workers fight against these acts daily with our profession's variegated skills and tools. Sometimes, as you will read in this issue, this fight involves using art and creativity to recover forgotten histories and build community. Other times, it involves crossing disciplinary and geographic borders to create positive change.

I am proud that our faculty, students and alumni bring every skill to bear on making our world a more just one.



Luis H. Zayas

Dean and Robert Lee Sutherland Chair in Mental Health and Social Policy



FROM YOU (ON "ALWAYS ON DUTY")

@nursingjobshers

"Love stories like this!"

@phallv

"Good informative article."

@Aggie_GR

"That's awesome and a great reminder that Texas' two largest research universities, TAMU and UT Austin, are jointly committed to supporting our veterans and their families!"

@Galagator89

"One of the many reasons I am proud to be part of the @UTSocialWork. The professors continue to teach the importance of research, how it can lead to creating interventions that can help individuals and the world. Thanks for sharing."



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 The University of Texas at Austin
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the **utopian**

The Utopian is published for alumni and friends of The University of Texas at Austin Steve Hicks School of Social Work.

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◀ In September 1966, the Parents Club of the Booker T. Washington Terrace public housing organized a cleanup day.

a social work PRECURSOR

Thelma Mitchell Elliott, desegregation at UT Austin, and the War on Poverty in Texas

In May of 1966, residents of Hergotz Lane in South East Austin celebrated the installation of a water spigot in their neighborhood. It was just a single, public spigot, but it meant that they no longer had to travel 10 miles to the nearest drinking water supply.

In early June, “a task force of three men and a fogging machine,” as the Austin Statesman put it, descended on Montopolis to wage war on mosquitoes. Later that month, after a hard battle for access to public transportation, Montopolis families were able to board a bus that connected them to Austin bus lines.

And in September, the newly minted Parents Club of the Booker T. Washington Terrace public housing organized a cleanup day. Parents and children cut down the high grass in the complex’s playground and removed trash, bottles and rocks.

By Andrea Campetella / Photos Courtesy Austin History Center

[THELMA ELLIOTT] WAS AMONG THE PRECURSORS, THE FIRST GENERATION OF BLACK STUDENTS WHO DESEGREGATED THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN IN THE 1950s.

This flurry of activity in mostly Mexican and African-American areas of Austin owed much to the late Thelma Mitchell Elliott (MSSW '54). Elliott was the leader of ENABLE, one of the many programs through which the Lyndon B. Johnson administration waged the War on Poverty across the nation. Under Elliott's leadership, ENABLE empowered diverse communities in Austin to tackle everything from living conditions to neighborhood safety and infrastructure.

But even before Elliott was publicly recognized for this important work, she did something else that, at the time, went unrecorded. She was among the Precursors, the first generation of black students who desegregated The University of Texas at Austin in the 1950s.

Integration at UT Austin

As told in *As We Saw It. The History of Integration at The University of Texas at Austin*, the struggle to desegregate the university started only two years after it was founded, when in 1885 an African-American man (unnamed in the records) applied for admission. He was rejected on the basis that "admittance of negroes" was "not of standard practice."

The turning point was after World War II. In 1946, with the support of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Heman Marion Sweatt applied to the law school and was

denied access on the basis of his race. The case (*Sweatt v. Painter*) went all the way to the Supreme Court, which in 1950 ruled in Sweatt's favor. Amidst much media attention and demonstrations in favor and against desegregation, Sweatt started law school in the fall semester of that year.

That same fall, the university's newly minted graduate program in social work opened its doors to students. In its two first years, the program admitted the late Gus Swain — who in 1953 became the first African-American male graduate — and then Elliott, who in 1954 became the first African-American female graduate.

In a speech Swain gave in 1982 he described going to campus with the threat of violence, at a time when buildings off the main drag were plastered with sayings like "Nigger go home." But he also recalled that the school of social work felt like an "oasis" and a safe place during this time.

Anita Swain, who was married to Gus Swain when he was in school, said in a phone conversation that "the school of social work was pretty liberal as far as race relations." She also remembered her late husband as a fighter for equality.

"He would not tolerate racial discrimination. He was a crusader. He was in the right field, always trying to make things better and help people move on. When we lived in Washington [after Swain graduated], we were marching every Saturday!" she recalled. I just kept my



Photo: AR-2007-017-045, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library



boots ready because whether it was cold, or snowy or wet, we were going to march!”

The Swains knew Elliott as a neighbor and family friend. Anita Swain remembered her husband giving Elliott information about the newly opened social work program and encouraging her to apply.

At the time, Elliott was married to O. H. Houston, then a business manager at Sam Houston College. They had a young daughter, Ora Houston, who is now Austin’s Council Member for District 1. She still lives in the house in East Austin where she grew up.

At least as remembered by Ora Houston, Elliott was not the marching type. But she was a multifaceted community leader for whom the graduate social work program was a great match.

“She was president of the PTA; she was very involved in the community; she was very involved in the church... and she had a very deep sense of social justice,” Houston said.

Project ENABLE and Beyond

After receiving her Master of Science in Social Work in 1954, Elliott worked as a probation officer for the Travis County Juvenile Court until 1966, when she was tapped to lead project ENABLE.

ENABLE stood for Education and Neighborhood Action for Better Living Environment. It was sponsored by Child and Family Services and received funding through the new Office of Economic Opportunity, the federal agency responsible for administering most of the War on Poverty programs.

In Austin, ENABLE started by reaching out to mothers of children enrolled in Head Start — another War on Poverty program.

“ENABLE is meant to give them [the mothers] a sense of self, purpose, confidence and power, something that will grow, a

motivation, and the tools to get something done for a better life,” Elliott explained in a *Statesman* article of May 19, 1966.

ENABLE soon expanded into “neighborhood group problem-solving” initiatives that engaged community members to tackle everything from unsanitary living conditions in rental units to neighborhood safety and infrastructure.

Barely a year after it was launched, ENABLE Austin was considered one of the most successful of 60 such projects that existed across the nation. Because of the program’s positive impact in communities such as Montopolis, in October 1966 Elliott was asked to address a national conference of Head Start teachers.

In true social work fashion, Elliott chose to emphasize self-awareness and strength-based perspectives during her address. As reported in the *Statesman*, she told Head Start teachers to be aware of their own insensitivities and blind spots when working with families, and make efforts to involve and empower parents.

“We in ENABLE are also committed to involving the parents in the education of their children. We encourage parents to use their native talents and constitutional rights to make decisions affecting them, their children, and the neighborhood where they live,” Elliott told the teachers.

ENABLE IS MEANT TO GIVE [MOTHERS] A MOTIVATION, AND THE TOOLS TO GET SOMETHING DONE FOR A BETTER LIFE.

In late 1966, Elliott left ENABLE to join the Texas Office of Economic Opportunity, where she was tasked with developing resource materials, ideas and techniques to be used in community projects across the state.

As the War on Poverty and its accompanying federal funding dwindled down in the context of escalation of the Vietnam War, Elliott continued her career in social services. She first joined the Austin/Travis County public health system and then the Texas Department of Human Services, from which she eventually retired. She died on July 21, 1998.

“I tell people all the time that I have my mother’s sense of social justice,” daughter Ora Houston said. “She was not a rebel, she was not out there marching on the streets. But on her own quiet way, she made important changes.” ■

OPPOSITE PAGE

Elliott at the Booker T. Washington Terrace public housing.

LEFT Elliott (second from right, in green dress) with ENABLE team members.

BOTTOM Hergotz Lane residents using the public water spigot.

DESEGREGATION

*at The University of
Texas at Austin*



1883

University opens its doors.



1885

First record of African American applicant (unnamed) denied admission.



1938

George L. Allen is able to register for a class but then his registration is canceled.



1946

Heman Sweatt is denied admission to the law school. Case (Sweatt v. Painter) goes to the Supreme Court.



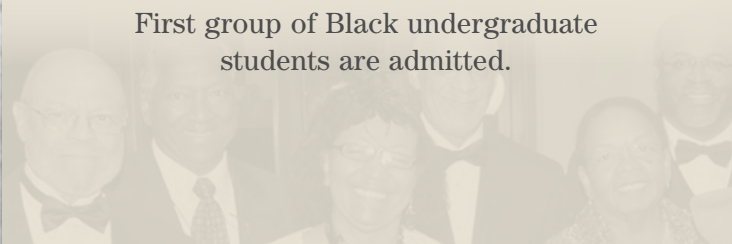
1950

Supreme Court rules in Sweatt's favor. UT becomes the first institution of higher education in the South required by law to admit African Americans to its graduate programs.



1956

First group of Black undergraduate students are admitted.



Permitting and Development Center | 6310 Wilhelmina Delco Drive, Austin, TX 78752 | (512) 978-4000

General Information

Location: **2207 E 22ND ST**
 Parcel ID: **0212100505**
 Grid: **MK23**

Planning & Zoning

*Right click [hyperlinks](#) to open in a new window.

Future Land Use (FLUM): **Single Family, Transportation**

Regulating Plan: **No Regulating Plan**

Zoning: **SF-3-NP**

Zoning Cases: [C14-02-0057](#)
[C14H-2025-0122](#)

Zoning Ordinances: **020801-92**
[19990225-070b](#)
[20060406-051](#)

Zoning Overlays: **Selected Sign Ordinances**
Residential Design Standards: LDC/25-2-Subchapter F
ADU Approx Area Reduced Parking

Neighborhood Plan: [UPPER BOGGY CREEK: BLACKLAND](#)

Infill Options: **Garage Placement Design Option, Parking Placement Imp Cover**
Design Option, Small Lot Amnesty Infill Option

Neighborhood Restricted Parking Areas: --

Mobile Food Vendors: --

Historic Landmark: --

Urban Roadways: **Yes**

Zoning Guide

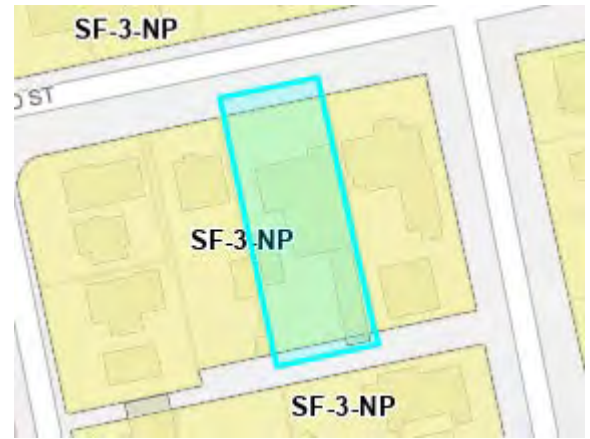
The [Guide to Zoning](#) provides a quick explanation of the above Zoning codes, however, the [Land Use Assistance](#) provides general zoning assistance and can advise you on the type of development allowed on a property. Visit [Zoning](#) for the description of each Base Zoning District. For official verification of the zoning of a property, please request a [Zoning Verification Letter](#). General information on the [Neighborhood Planning Areas](#) is available from Neighborhood Planning.

Environmental

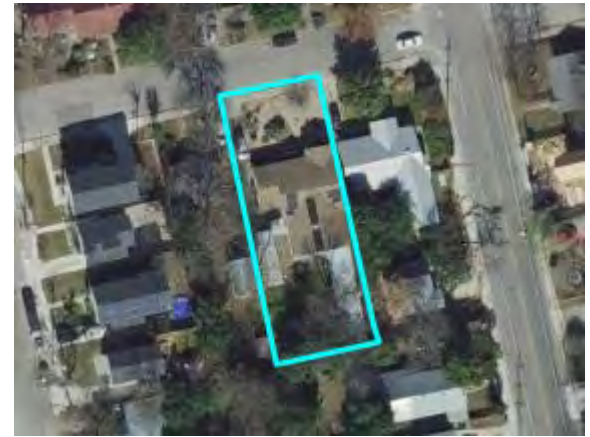
Fully Developed Floodplain: **No**
 FEMA Floodplain: **No**
 Austin Watershed Regulation Areas: **URBAN**
 Watershed Boundaries: **Boggy Creek**
 Creek Buffers: **No**
 Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone: **No**
 Edwards Aquifer Recharge Verification Zone: **No**
 Erosion Hazard Zone Review Buffer: **No**

Political Boundaries

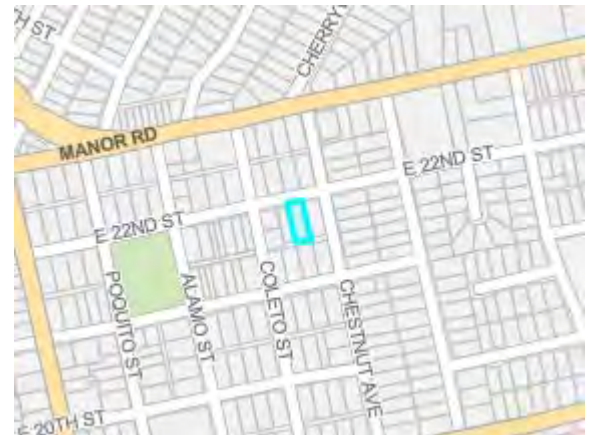
Jurisdiction: **AUSTIN FULL PURPOSE**
 Council District: **1**
 County: **TRAVIS**
 School District: **Austin ISD**
 Community Registry: **Austin Independent School District, Austin Neighborhoods Council, Blackland Neighborhood Assn., Del Valle Community Coalition, East Austin Conservancy, Friends of Austin Neighborhoods, Homeless Neighborhood Association, Overton Family Committee, Preservation Austin, Upper Boggy Creek Neighborhood Planning Team**



Zoning Map



Imagery Map



Vicinity Map



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February 4, 2026

RE: Dr. O.H. and Thelma Elliott House Historic Landmark Designation

Dear Chair Heimsath, Vice Chair Evans, and Members of the Historic Landmark Commission

[Preservation Austin](#) exists to empower Austinites to shape a more inclusive, resilient, and meaningful community culture through preservation. We write in support of the proposed historic landmark designation of the Dr. O.H. and Thelma Elliott House for architecture and historic associations. Built in 1954, the Elliot House is a testament to the lives of two remarkable educators and civic leaders, Dr. Ora Herman Elliott and Thelma Mitchell Elliott.

The Elliots were leaders in the communities of segregated East Austin and in the state and nationwide Civil Rights movement. Dr. O.H. Elliot served as business manager and Interim President of Samuel Houston College, and was instrumental in the merger of the college with Tillotson College in 1952, forming Houston-Tillotson University. Among his many accomplishments, Dr. Elliot led efforts to seek Black representation in elections within the Democratic Party in the 1940s, was a director of the City’s Rights Agency tasked with implementation of the Civil Rights Law of 1964, and played a significant role in the founding of Austin Community College in 1973 through his work with the Coordinating Board of Texas Colleges and Universities. Through his decades of political involvement, Dr. Elliot cultivated close relationships with President Lyndon B. Johnson, Governors John Connally, Preston Smith, and Dolph Briscoe, and U.S. Representative Jake Pickle.

Thelma Mitchell Elliot was one of the first students to desegregate the University of Texas in the 1950s and was the first Black woman to graduate and obtain her degree from UT’s School of Social Work. She was the first Black female probation officer for the Travis County Juvenile Court, serving in this role for 10 years. In 1966, Mrs. Elliot was recruited to lead the ENABLE (Education and Neighborhood Action for Better Living Environment) program, part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, which tackled initiatives from unsanitary living conditions in rental units to neighborhood safety and infrastructure. Her efforts under ENABLE Austin were recognized as one of the most successful initiatives of its kind nationwide.

Homeowner and daughter, Ms. Ora Houston, carries on her parents’ legacy of civic leadership, notably during her time as representative of District 1 on Austin City Council from 2015 to 2019. A committed preservationist, we congratulate Ms. Houston on her efforts to preserve her family’s history and the history of East Austin.

Sincerely,

Miriam Conner, President

Written comments must be submitted to the board or commission (or the contact person listed on the notice) before or at a public hearing. Your comments should include the board or commission's name, the scheduled date of the public hearing, and the Case Number and the contact person listed on the notice.

Case Number: C14H-2025-0122
Contact: Kalan Contreras, 512-974-2727
Public Hearing: Feb. 4, 2026, Historic Landmark Commission

Catherine Tucek
Your Name (please print)

I am in favor
 I object

2200 E 22nd St 78722
Your address(es) affected by this application

Catherine Tucek 28 JAN 2026
Signature Date

Daytime Telephone: 512 633 0471

Comments: I support my neighbor in
her request for her zoning
change

If you use this form to comment, it may be returned to:
Austin Planning
Historic Preservation Office
P. O. Box 1088, Austin, TX 78767
Or email to:
preservation@austintexas.gov

Written comments must be submitted to the board or commission (or the contact person listed on the notice) before or at a public hearing. Your comments should include the board or commission's name, the scheduled date of the public hearing, and the Case Number and the contact person listed on the notice.

Case Number: C14H-2025-0122

Contact: Kalan Contreras, 512-974-2727

Public Hearing: Feb. 4, 2026, Historic Landmark Commission

Athena Leyton
Your Name (please print)

I am in favor
 I object

2101 Maple Ave. #A 78722
Your address(es) affected by this application

Athena Leyton
Signature

1/26/26
Date

Daytime Telephone: 512 484 4883

Comments: _____

If you use this form to comment, it may be returned to:

Austin Planning

Historic Preservation Office

P. O. Box 1088, Austin, TX 78767

Or email to:

preservation@austintexas.gov

From: [brenda malik](#)
To: [Sturgill, Hunter](#); [Lukes, Austin](#); [Wagner, Sofia](#); [Contreras, Kalan](#); [McKnight, Kim](#); [Taniguchi, Bat - BC](#); [Grogan, Harmony - BC](#); [Koch, Kevin - BC](#); [Acton, Jeffrey - BC](#); [Larosche, Carl - BC](#); [Heimsath, Ben - BC](#); [McWhorter, Trey - BC](#); [Alvarez, Jaime - BC](#); [Evans, Roxanne - BC](#); [Rice, Judah - BC](#)
Subject: Opposition to Rezoning of
Date: Wednesday, February 4, 2026 6:08:47 PM

You don't often get email from [REDACTED] [Learn why this is important](#)

External Email - Exercise Caution

To Whom It May Concern:

As a resident in the Rogers-Washington-Holy Cross Historic District, I am very concerned that the rezoning application in our neighborhood will increase the already crowded residential streets and leave us vulnerable in the event of an emergency event.

Please deny the application for rezoning on 22nd Street!

Brenda Malik

CAUTION: This is an EXTERNAL email. Please use caution when clicking links or opening attachments. If you believe this to be a malicious or phishing email, please report it using the "Report Message" button in Outlook.
For any additional questions or concerns, contact CSIRT at "cybersecurity@austintexas.gov".