

THE ASTIN-PORTER HOME

by Tom Stacy

c. 1979

One of the most majestic and stately historical homes in the Brazos Valley is the former Astin-Porter home located at 600 E. 29th Street. The home rests on one and one-third acres comprising lots one through five, of the Hill and Mitchell block, City of Bryan, Brazos County, Texas.¹ The land upon which the home is built comes from the ninth league granted by the Mexican Government to Stephen F. Austin as a part of his reward for locating 300 families in Texas.²

Mrs. Onah H. Astin purchased the five lots in October 1901 to build a home.³ She retained the architectural firm of Howard Messer and W. Wemyss Smith of Waco, Texas, to build the home.⁴ Construction began in 1901 and the home was completed in 1903.⁵ Messer and Smith traveled every other weekend to Bryan to supervise the construction of this home, as well as several others they were supervising the construction of in the community.⁶

The building is one of the finest examples of Classical Revival architecture. It has two stories with a spacious attic. The most distinguishing mark of this style of architecture is the great front, two-story porch with Corinthian columns. Two round and two square columns support a simple pediment over which an oval window was placed. The porch and balcony extend the length of the entire front portion of the house and almost one-half of the two sides. Viewed from the street, the overall symmetry and good proportion are majestic. Small white balls on the rooftop give the exterior a Palladian flair.

On the interior, the original structure contained eleven rooms and one bath. Also, the attic spread the entire third floor. Two staircases, one to the front and another in the back, allow passage and ventilation from the first to second floor. Small, snug nooks and seating areas reinforce the Classical Revival intentions on the interior. Five fireplaces, four downstairs and one upstairs, were built according

¹ Abstract of Title, Brazos County Abstract Co., Number 5589, p. 148.

² Ibid. p. 105.

³ Ibid. Land transactions listed in order from 1921 until 1901.

⁴ Ibid. p. 99.

⁵ Original architectural plans of house.

⁶ Interview with Donna Coulter Carnes – Bryan.

to the original plans. Stained glass adorns some of the downstairs windows. A large jeweled and rippled stained glass window overlooks the dining room.

The structure is pier and beam and constructed primarily from pecan wood.⁷ The wood is native to this region. A circular drive was originally constructed to service East 29th Street, but was covered over and sodded in 1946 when the drive was located in the rear of the home.⁸

Six years later, in 1954, certain additions were made to the home. The Holland Porter family added a large clubroom on the side of the structure, and five bathrooms to the interior of the home. Also, they covered the exterior walls with white metal siding to protect and enhance the beauty. One downstairs fireplace and the bathroom were removed during the remodeling. A.P. Wehmeyer and son were responsible for the construction and remodeling. John Astin Perkins, Mrs. Onah Astin's grandson, was retained by the Porters as an interior decorator.⁹

The Astin family has significant roots and importance in Bryan and throughout the Brazos Valley. James H. Astin and his wife, Celia E. Ashbrook moved from Alabama to the Brazos Valley in 1864. They had four sons, John E., William Edgar, James P., and J. Robert. Celia died in 1874 and her husband married Mrs. Onah Ward, a schoolteacher from Arkansas.¹⁰ James and Onah had two sons, Erving Hugh and Roger Quincy and a daughter, Daisy. James H. Astin died while on a trip to Colorado in 1897.¹¹

The family grew cotton along the Brazos River and had several plantations owned by the sons in the family. After their father died, the family began to build residences in the City of Bryan. Onah originally built this colonial house for her daughter, Daisy.¹² However, Daisy married F.D. Perkins in 1903 and moved to McKinney, Texas.¹³ Through the Astin Foundation, Mrs. Astin and her sons make valuable contributions to many worthy community projects.

The Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches were constructed with contributions from the Astin and other Bryan families. Also, Bob Astin

⁷ Interview Henry Buchanan, John Astin Perkins

⁸ Interview Margaret Porter, Bryan.

⁹ Architectural plans.

¹⁰ John Astin Perkins, Interview Dallas, Abstract, p. 101.

¹¹ Cemetery records, Bryan Cemetery

¹² Dorsey, Mary Edna, Those were the Days, Bryan Independent School District, 1976.

¹³ Wilcox, Lois Alyne. The Early History of Bryan, Texas, unpublished Master's Thesis, Graduate Department of the University of Texas, 1952.

contributed heavily to Bryan Academy.¹⁴ Erving Astin purchased the Merchants and Planters National Bank in 1902 and changed the name to City National Bank. It remains one of the most successful in the area. John E. Astin became one of the first Postmasters in Bryan and served from 1912 to 1915. Roger managed the large commissary near the Brazos bottoms and owned an extensive plantation.¹⁵

However, probably the most famous Astin was Bob. He was elected to the State Senate in 1912 and served until 1916. He was the only son to live in the Astin home on East 29th St. He entertained regularly in the home and two of his more famous guests in the house were Governor James E. (“Pa”) and Mrs. Miriam A. (“Ma”) Ferguson.¹⁶

Mrs. Onah Astin died in 1944, and Erving, executor of his mother’s estate, sold the house to Henry Buchanan,¹⁷ who planned to establish a catering service in the house, but abandoned the idea and sold out in 1946 to Holland Porter, a local cotton plantation owner.¹⁸ Mr. Porter retained ownership and reared his family in the house. The Porter family has had lengthy residence in the area. Holland Porter’s grandparents came to Texas from Mississippi and settled in Caldwell. The family continued to live in Caldwell until they began farming cotton in 1912. At that time Holland Porter, his parents, and two brothers moved near the Brazos River on the family farm where they grew up. Holland married and moved his family to the home on East 29th St. in 1946. He has continued his successful cotton growing in the fertile Brazos bottomlands.¹⁹ He sold the property, including the house, to Drs. Ann Hughes and John Kinross-Wright in November 1978.

The house is presently used as offices for DISCOVERY Land, Inc., a Private Psychiatric Hospital for Adolescents. There have been no significant alterations since the 1954 remodeling and the house retains the elegance and beauty of its original state.

¹⁴ Interview with Tom Castles, Bryan.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview John Perkins, Dallas.

¹⁷ Abstract, p. 101.

¹⁸ Interview with H. Buchanan.

¹⁹ Interview with Holland Porter.

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INTERVIEWS

Buchanan, Henry	June 15, 1979
Carnes, Donna Coulter	April 27, 1979
Castles, Tom	June 17, 1979
Perkins, John Astin	July 27, 1979
Porter, Holland	May 17, 1979