

# The Cavitt House

by

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The structure that is the subject of this application has been known for many years as the Cavitt House, 713 E. 30th St., Bryan, Texas, in the center of Bryan's East Side Historical District. This large Italianate villa style brick house, built in the late eighteen seventies by William Richard Cavitt (1849-1924) and somewhat simplified in 1920, is considered to be the oldest home of any size in the county. It was the family homestead of the Cavitt family--mother, father and six children--for almost precisely a century, the last family owner, a daughter, dying in 1978.

The Cavitt House is already on the National Register of Historic Places, having been entered therein on October 27, 1976.<sup>1</sup> National Register designation did not require written permission of the owners, but the award of a Texas marker does require such. The Texas recognition would have been sought in 1976 but the two surviving sisters who then owned the house were in St. Joseph's Hospital and unable to make the decision.

To follow is, first, a survey of the ownership of the house and information about the occupants, especially the Cavitt family; second, a review of its modifications through time; and, third, a description of architectural and other features, both exterior and interior. Attached are photographs and copies of relevant documents; sources are footnoted.

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<sup>1</sup> See Exhibit A letter of Nov. 2, 1976 from the National Park Service.

## Owners

Cavitt purchased the city block on which the house stands for \$1,000 in January 1875.<sup>2</sup> Tradition has it that he brought his new bride, Mary Mitchell Cavitt, into the newly constructed house during the next October. However, the county assessor's records show the assessed value of the property as rising from \$1,000 to \$4,000 in 1881.<sup>3</sup> There are no original house plans extant nor other records to show building date. The best estimate is that the house could have been built as early as 1875 and as late as 1879 or 1880.

The Cavitts came to Texas from Virginia via Tennessee, settling in Wheelock, Texas. William R. Cavitt, known most of his life as "Major" Cavitt, was born in Wheelock on July 4, 1849.<sup>4</sup> He was a graduate of the University of Virginia, a lawyer, and county attorney from 1878 to 1880 and again from 1882 to 1884. He represented the county in the state legislature for two terms in the 1880s. Appointed to the Board of Directors of Texas A&M University by Gov. L.S. Ross in 1883, Cavitt served until 1896.<sup>5</sup> His wife was a niece of Col. Harvey Mitchell, often referred to as the "Father of Brazos Country." There were six children. Family names and dates are as follows: W.R. (1849-1924), Mary his wife (1854-1914), W. Horace (1876-1926), Ethel (1878-1977), Howard (1881-1913), Fred (1885-1950), and the twins Esther (1891-1958) and Edith (1891-1978). The family affiliated early with the First Presbyterian Church. W.R. was the second superintendent of the Sunday School; Fred was a deacon and elder; and the

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<sup>2</sup> See Exhibit B. This is Block 16 of the Philips Addition as shown on the plat in vol. M, p. 253 of the Brazos County Deed Records.

<sup>3</sup> See Brazos County Assessor's Abstract Book, 1879-1885, Philips Addition, pp. 264-65.

<sup>4</sup> See Ellen B. Cavitt, Some Tracings of Cavett-Cavitt Family History, 1725-1965, Waco, Texas, 1965, privately published, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Henry O. Dethloff, A Centennial History of Texas A&M University, 2 vols. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1975), vol. I, p. 121 and vol. II, pp. 612-14. Cavitt became president of the board in 1886.

sisters all served terms as historian for the Women of the Church. During the 1950s and 1960s the Cavitt sisters donated more than eight acres of land for the building of a new church and outbuildings. W.R., the father, became perhaps the largest land developer in Bryan during the first quarter of this century. At the time of his death he owned much of the land between his home and College Station four miles away. Named for family members are Cavitt Avenue, Twin Boulevard (for the twins Edith and Esther), and Esther and Ethel Streets, all in Bryan.<sup>6</sup>

W. R. Cavitt willed the city block and its house to the surviving children who, in turn, willed them to their surviving siblings.<sup>7</sup> There was only one grandchild, a daughter of Horace. She married a cousin, Hillsman Wilson of Houston. They adopted a child, Anne, and the W.R. Cavitt line ended. The last two sisters died in the winter of 1977-78 and the house, vacant for some years because these sisters—now millionaires from family land sales—had taken up residence in St. Joseph's Hospital in Bryan, went into the hands of estate lawyers. Most of the combined estate went to charity, and the house, with its city block of land, was sold to the Brazos County Citizens for Historic Preservation, Inc., now known as the Brazos Heritage Society, on Nov. 5, 1981.<sup>8</sup> The Heritage Society then resubdivided the city block into three lots, as shown in Exhibit B.<sup>9</sup> As

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<sup>6</sup> Most of the information about the family comes from two sources William R. Cavitt's obituary titled "Major W.R. Cavitt Died Today," The Bryan Eagle, August 28, 1924, p. 1; and a three page history of "The Cavitt Family" prepared by Dr. Harrison E. Hierth, former head of the TAMU English department and long time associate of the Cavitts in the Presbyterian Church, in 1982 on the basis of personal knowledge and the records of the Church.

<sup>7</sup> See Probate Files, Brazos County, #s 1289, 2290, 5088 and 5253.

<sup>8</sup> See vol. 499, p. 848 of the Brazos County Deed Records.

<sup>9</sup> See Exhibit B. The house went with lot 1, representing three-quarters of the east half of the city block, or approximately an acre and a half. A full city block in this addition is about four acres. See also the Philips Addition replat in vol. 744, p. 79 of

the city of Bryan had helped the society purchase the property, the western half of the block (lot 3 resubdivision) was given to the city for what is now known as The Heritage Park. Lot 2 at the south end of the eastern half was sold to a local dentist, Dr. Russell Bradley, who shortly moved a turn of the century Queen Anne structure there as his own residence.

On May 14, 1982, lot 1 of the resubdivision, including the house, was sold to Prof. and Mrs. Peter M. McIntyre.<sup>10</sup> Prof. McIntyre has been a member of the Physics department at Texas A&M University, well known for his association with the Supercollider Project and the very recent discovery of the smallest atomic particle. They commenced to renovate the property, which was in a bad state of repair.

The McIntyres sold the property to Prof. and Mrs. Paul P. Van Riper on Sept. 2, 1986, who continue to own and live in the home.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Van Riper is Professor Emeritus of Political Science and former head of the department at Texas A&M University. He and his wife were among the founding members of the Brazos Heritage Society and he is a former president. He has been a member of the Brazos County Historical Commission since 1976. The Van Ripers continued and have largely completed the renovation of the home, at least back to its 1920s form. Since the early 1980s the house has regularly been on historical and other homes tours and is considered a centerpiece of the Bryan East Side Historical District.

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the county deed records, a copy of which is attached as Exhibit B-2.

<sup>10</sup> See vol. 520, p. 317 of the county deed records.

<sup>11</sup> See vol. 912, p. 13 of the county deed records.

## Structural History

The basic and original house style is that of a late nineteenth century Italianate villa, unusual in its three-bricks thick exterior and central hall walls, supporting the interior beams. Interviews in 1931 with two Bryan senior citizens, both then in their nineties, confirm that the Cavitts undertook to simplify and "modernize" the house around 1920, so that it looked more Neo-Classical.<sup>12</sup> This was done by removing much of the Italianate gingerbread, stuccoing the exterior brick, replacing wood porches with brick veneer concrete slabs, and installing three inch oak flooring throughout most of the house. A reinforced concrete basement with a trap door was installed under the kitchen in the early 1950s, probably to serve as a bomb shelter.

The McIntyres remodeled the upstairs bathroom, replaced a badly damaged main door, repaired some of the brick, and began to repaint the interior.

The Van Rippers completed a full renovation in 1986-87. They repaired and repainted the stuccoed walls and exterior woodwork, replaced four badly deteriorated columns and a one story rear porch, and removed an outside stairs coming down to the rear porch, these stairs not having been original to the house. The original brick foundations were strengthened throughout by supporting pier and beam foundations paralleling the brick on the interior. The interior sheet-rocking of the walls, begun by the Cavitts, was completed and the interior completely repainted in suitable Victorian colors. A large downstairs closet was added in the library, as well as a new

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with the Hanover sisters, Mrs. James H. Beard and Mrs. Henry Wicks, Sept. 23, 1981.

stairway to the attic (there having been only a steep ladder).

The home having always been a family residence, it has never been cut up, made into apartments, or structurally altered in any significant way except for the stuccoing and removal of considerable gingerbread. The Cavitt house is of particular historical importance to the city of Bryan for it is the city's only Italianate structure and it represents the earliest group of substantial structures built here. It is also interesting topographically, for the house occupies the highest point of land for ten miles around and the view from the top is exceptional.

## Architectural Description

The description here is taken from that prepared by Joe Williams, representing the Texas State Historical Commission, in connection with the 1976 nomination for the National Register of Historic Places. The Cavitt house is a two-story stuccoed brick masonry structure with load bearing exterior walls. Including the kitchen basement, the house has about 4,500 square feet of interior floor space, divided into 14 rooms.<sup>13</sup>

The house consists of three elements, a two-story rectangular main facade, a two story secondary block located immediately west of the main block, and a one story kitchen ell located on the western side of the secondary block. The eastern facade of the house exhibits the asymmetrical massing and large fenestration typical of the Italianate style. The facade is divided vertically in an A, B, C, C, pattern. The northeastern two-thirds of the facade contains a deeply inset double gallery with wide bays which frame entrances on both floors, flanked by two narrower bays on the north side. Three pillars on each level support the galleries. They are very austere with simple mitred cyma recta moulded caps and bases. The pillars themselves are square wooden columns. The second floor gallery's balustrade, however, is composed of slim machine turned wooden balusters. The A-section of the facade contains a wide rectangular bay window on the first floor with 2/2 light double hung sash windows. The bay has no ornamentation or cornice other than the metal rain gutter which carries runoff from its small wood shingled hipped roof. Above the bay are paired 2/2 light double hung sash windows set within a single broad opening with a stilted segmental arch. An identical bay window and stilted arched window combination is located on the north side of the house.

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<sup>13</sup> See floor plans in Exhibits C and D.

The main entrance consists of panelled double doors, each with a fixed rectangular glass pane with a round headed two light transom which has a single vertical mullion. The second floor gallery entrance is a panelled door with a single pane arched transom. The first and second story entrances on the west side of the house are similar.

The inset double galleries on the west side of the house are supported by three chamfered square wooden columns on each level. The first floor columns have simple mitred cyma recta moulded caps and bases. The second floor columns are more elaborate with bolder cyma recta moulded caps and trefoliated brackets. The balustrade is composed of wooden machine turned balusters. The elaboration of the second floor is typical of the Italianate style and is interpreted in the courthouse in only these few details. In the early 20th century, a half turn staircase, supported on crude wooden posts, was built at the southwest end of the gallery; this has been removed.

The kitchen ell is connected to the western gallery by means of a single story gallery consisting of a shed roof supported on three chamfered columns with simple mitred and beveled caps and bases. The kitchen ell, unlike the remainder of the Cavitt house, has double hung 4/4 light sash windows. The rectangular ell has a fireplace and chimney on its north wall. The chimney is plastered brick and rises only slightly above the ell's ridge pole which runs east and west, A breezeway once divided the ell from the two-story secondary block, but has been enclosed with a stuccoed brick wall on its north side and a wood and glass frame wall on the south side, both walls containing doors, A small brick concrete stoop with tubular steel handrails was added in the early 20th century. The stairs are at a right angle to the kitchen ell's north wall. Similar brick veneer slabs were used to replace the floors of the ground level galleries.



The Cavitt house has a subdued wooden frieze with raised discs and rectangular panels in alternating sequence. There is no cornice other than the metal rain gutters. The two-story blocks have wood shingled hipped roofs whose ridge poles intersect at a right angle, A \*T\* shaped captain's walk serves to visually link the two separate roof elements. The head of the \*T\* is located above the ridge pole of the eastern block. The captain's walk has a simple slat balustrade. The floor of the captain's walk is soldered metal, as are the floors of the two second floor porches.

There are a few other interesting features. The library (to the left of the front door as one enters), which the Cavitts, for reasons unknown, never finished during the 1920 renovation and used as a storeroom, has been left much as the Cavitts left it so that the construction is easily visible. Two of the three iron tie-rods spanning the building from east to west can be seen in the ceiling of this room. The ceilings of the two bathrooms are only seven to eight feet high. Above them are metal-lined, tarred cisterns tied into the roof originally, to provide running water, which did not come to Bryan until about 1900. Two rooms, one up and one down, still have the old original pine floors. The ceilings are twelve feet down and 11 feet up; all the room ceilings are of wood. There are three working chimneys and five fireplaces. There are forty windows with five exterior doors down and two up. The present furniture is more than half family. Most is antique, varying from a William and Mary highboy of about 1700 to Art Deco.

There is an old garden in the rear, mainly for flowers, and the original flower beds, marked by brick borders, are still visible. The garden fence is wrought iron set in stonework, with an arched stone entrance. Nearby is a stone and brick barbeque pit. The metal and stonework here date from 1940, though the garden itself long antedates that. The two outbuildings were probably built in the 1930s or 1940s.

The following photographs are attached as further exhibits<sup>1</sup>

- 1) Exhibit E, photo front early 1880s
- 2) Exhibit F, photo from the early 1920s
- 5) Exhibits Q, H, I and J, current photos of four exterior sides
- 4) Exhibits K, L, and M, showing interior scenes

#### Editor's Note:

If you wish to see any available appendices attached to this narrative, please visit the Carnegie Center of Brazos Valley History, often referred to as the "Carnegie Library," at 111 South Main St., Bryan, TX. Ask to see the Van Riper Collection.