

Old and new



University Acres residents, from left, Violet Stracener, Myrtie Polizotto, Ora Childress, and Mildred and Frank Lerner are on hand for the unveiling of the University Acres marker on the 50th anniversary of the subdivision.

University Acres has rich history, but is undergoing changes

- By [EMILY KERN HEBERT](#)
- Advocate staff writer
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- Editor's note: This is one in a series of occasional features on neighborhoods in the Baton Rouge area.

John and Beth Dupaquier bought their house and lot in University Acres for \$15,000 in 1954.

At the time, Beth Dupaquier said, she questioned whether she and her husband could afford the payments for the home on Chandler Drive.

But, she had fallen in love with the hilly land and so the couple found the financing and made it work.

The Dupaquiers taught piano to all the neighborhood children, holding recitals in their home. They continue to teach neighborhood children and volunteer to teach children at Highland Elementary School who want to take lessons.

Their property turned out to be a wise investment. The Dupaquiers estimate their house and double lot would sell today for around \$250,000.

Much has changed since the Dupaquiers moved in.

A trend among buyers is to purchase older homes and tear them down to make way for new construction. Those new homes are valued at \$1 million or more, said neighborhood association President Dan Holliday.

Some residents and former residents praise the development, while others feel it has changed the feel of the neighborhood.

“It’s a matter of choice, of course,” said John Dupaquier. “One of our granddaughters thinks all the big mansions ruin the character of the neighborhood.”

John Dupaquier is resigned to it. While sitting in his kitchen, he said, “that’s going to happen here too.”

Two University Acres residents, Julia Hawkins and Constance Navratil, compiled the history of the neighborhood in a book, “University Acres & Highland School: A History.”

Here is how the neighborhood got started:

The land that the neighborhood sits on was originally owned by the Sam McConnell family, acquired through a Spanish land grant in the 18th century. The McConnell plantation consisted of 300 acres of cotton and corn named “China Grove” after the chinaberry trees that grew there.

The neighborhood’s first filing was made in 1923 by Berlin E. Perkins’ The Pelican Realty Co.

At the time, Highland Road was a gravel road to LSU, and dirt roads leading from the McConnell plantation defined the subdivision.

Perkins gave the roads flowery names such as Oak, Myrtle, Pecan and Sycamore. Those were later changed to their current names when University Acres was incorporated into the city limits.

With news in 1925 of LSU’s move to its present location, South Baton Rouge exploded with developers eager to meet the needs of the university crowd.

Growth in University Acres was slow at first.

In April 1938, Harry Nelson held an auction at University Acres to sell lots. The neighborhood was advertised as “Country Living,” and some lots brought in \$200. Enough were sold to get the neighborhood really going.

Some long-standing residents of this South Baton Rouge neighborhood, including the Dupaquiers and Hawkinses, recently reminisced about the rural feel of the neighborhood back in the 1940s and '50s.

Hawkins and her husband, Murray “Buddy” Hawkins, moved to University Acres in 1949, after the conclusion of World War II. Buddy Hawkins built their home.

Along Highland Road, past University Acres, there were only a few scattered farms and not much else.

Bayou Duplantier was located to the rear of the neighborhood, limiting development there.

Luckily, a bridge had been built across Bayou Duplantier on Lee Drive three years before the Hawkins family moved to the neighborhood, allowing traffic flow from Highland to Perkins Road.

“It sure made it easier to go places,” Julia Hawkins said.

Families rarely worried about their children, who would find ways to entertain themselves outdoors.

Ladies would gather at each others’ houses as part of a neighborhood coffee club.

Construction gradually picked up, and each year more and more houses were built.

Today, there are more than 240 homes in the neighborhood. It now contains a school, church and park.

The neighborhood hub was Highland Elementary School, which opened its doors in 1940.

Longtime school secretary Pat Hines, who moved to University Acres in 1948 and lived there until a few years ago, said Highland Elementary was one of the top-rated elementary schools at the time.

“As my children were growing up, it was the focal point of the neighborhood,” Hines said.

One of the year’s highlights, Hines said, was the annual Halloween carnival held at the school.

Parents built all the props for games and a haunted house. Someone organized a cake walk, and the cafeteria manager held a spaghetti dinner that night, Hines said.

“It was a money-making thing for the school,” Hines said.

Besides the large number of faculty and staff of LSU and Highland Elementary that lived in University Acres, Hines also pointed out the number of neighborhood residents who ran for public office.

Three University Acres residents ran for Louisiana governor: Carlos Spaht, Harrison Bagwell and Fred Dent.

Bill Burbank, for whom Burbank Drive was named, also called University Acres home. For his work beautifying the neighborhood, namely instigating the mass planting of Taiwanese cherry trees, he is affectionately known as the “unofficial mayor” of the Acres.

“I do think the environment within University Acres nurtured that desire for them to serve,” Hines said.

Some evidence of rural life remains today.

Families still enjoy Bill Stracener’s goats, which forage peacefully in the backs of Nelson and Menlo drives.

“It’s one of the fun things for the kids to do is bring carrots back there and feed the goats,” said neighborhood association President Dan Holliday. “It adds to the character of the neighborhood.”

The coffee club, started in the 1940s as a distraction from World War II, is still going strong today.

Holliday said he and his wife were attracted to the neighborhood because of the sense of community and the rural qualities amidst city life.

“We drove around the neighborhood and fell in love with it,” he said. “It has wide streets and lots of trees.”

When his family moved in, he said, neighbors brought cake, wine and a copy of Hawkins and Navratil’s book.

Before signing the purchase agreement, Holliday said, he and his wife visited the home late in the evening. The yard was filled with fireflies, which Holliday said he hadn’t seen in 20 years.

That sealed the deal.

The home originally was built as a small cottage in the 1940s or ’50s, he said.

It was added on to at least once, possibly twice, and now includes a larger kitchen, master suite, sunroom and loft over the covered garage, he said.

Holliday said he and his wife continued the work, focusing on the outside. They built a slate and brick patio, laid down sod in the yard and added flower beds.

One of the appealing aspects of the neighborhood is the variety of homes and wide range of prices, Holliday said.

Million dollar houses are intermingled with more modest homes. Homeowners and college renters interact nicely, he said.

Because of the variety of homes, Holliday said, “we get a really neat cross-section of families who live in our neighborhood.”

But, he added, “we have to watch because we don’t want to turn into a college renters’ neighborhood.”

Looking at the original plat, Holliday said, it’s clear the neighborhood was designed to have a range of lot sizes.

Some of the larger lots were subdivided before the neighborhood association became actively involved in opposing it, Holliday said.

“That is against the neighborhood restrictions,” he said. “We pretty aggressively enforce those restrictions.”

“I think the lots have really held their values and even increased in the last few years,” Holliday added.

Neighborhood association dues are \$50 a year.

“We’ve tried to raise them over the years. We have those younger who want to do it and older who are against it,” Holliday said.

“I’d like to have a bit more money,” he said.

One of the accomplishments of the association is working with the East Baton Rouge Recreation and Park Commission to improve the neighborhood’s park, Holliday said.

The association put \$5,000 from its savings account toward the work and started a fundraising campaign to add to the amount. In all, it contributed about \$25,000.

Today, the park is a popular place for families both that live in the neighborhood and elsewhere, Holliday said.

Like many neighborhoods, residents have to deal with some petty crime — theft from people’s garages and a few home and car break-ins.

Unlike neighboring Woodstone subdivision which has one entrance in and out, University Acres has four, Holliday said.

Currently, the association has a camera at one of its entrances and is working to install more.

“The purpose is mostly deterrent,” Holliday said.

He said the association has looked into getting more police patrols, but the cost is prohibitive.

There is an active Neighborhood Watch program and an e-mail alert system to notify residents of suspicious activity.

Holliday said his goal as association president is to set up a Twitter account in order to have instantaneous text messaging with everyone in the neighborhood to alert them to safety and emergency issues.

Another issue is that Highland Elementary School no longer is the school of choice for neighborhood residents.

Gone are the days of neighborhood children walking to school. Today, most of the children who live in the neighborhood attend private schools.

“I wish the public schools in our city were of the caliber I felt comfortable sending my kids there,” Holliday said.

“Frankly, I really do not feel it’s a real option for our kids and I live one door down,” he said.

Holliday said the future of the school is questionable.

“We keep hearing the Highland School is on the block to be shut down because it’s one of the smaller schools,” he said. “Whether that happens or not, I don’t know.”

Neighborhood residents do support the school, with residents mentoring students and reading to classrooms.

Residents also participate in a beautification day at the school every year.

“We try to do what we can to support the school. It would be a sad day if it were ever shut down,” he said.

University Acres

BOUNDARIES: Bayou Duplantier to the north, Highland Road to the south, College Hills neighborhood to the west and Nelson Drive to the east.

NUMBER OF HOMES: About 240.

YEAR FIRST DEVELOPED: 1923.

FUN FACT: A popular saying around LSU was that if you wanted to be a Boyd Professor, you better move to Nelson Drive in University Acres. In the 1960s, there were four: T. Harry Williams in history, Phil West in chemistry, Grover Murray in geology and George Lowery in ornithology.

Source: “University Acres & Highland School: A History”



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PATRICK DENNIS

Dan and Susan Holliday with their children, Jensen, 5, and Caroline, 2, are pictured at the newly refurbished University Acres Park at the intersection of Menlo and Leeward. Dan Holliday is the president of the neighborhood association.