

APPLICATION FOR A TEXAS HISTORICAL MARKER FOR AN INSTITUTION

THE LEWIS LIMITED SCHOOL

I. CONTEXT:

In 1987 my wife (Deborah Callanan) and I (Neal Wagner) purchased the large white wood-frame house at the northeast corner of Belknap Place and Mulberry Avenue, with current address 241 West Mulberry Avenue. During the purchase someone mentioned that the house may have once been used as a school for girls.

Some days later I went to the San Antonio main library and asked about a girls school on Mulberry. The librarian I talked with seemed to know a lot about San Antonio and its history, and she was confident that there had never been such a school. To her credit she quickly found references in an old city directory under "MULBERRY AVE, (West)" including the following:

1913 - 1916: 225 - Lewis Limited School; Miss Mattie Lewis (h); 2595

where "h" stood for "homestead".¹ So there was a school, but at a different address: 225 instead of 241.

Later, I found a reference in Donald Everett's excellent history of the Monte Vista Historic District,² which describes a school in that district: "At no longer extant 225 West Mulberry in 1914, the Lewis Limited School stood alone on that block." He had a few more comments and a reference to an old newspaper: San Antonio Express, May 20, 1915.

This issue is the fiftieth anniversary edition of the Express, containing a huge amount of information about San Antonio, including a section titled "San Antonio Schools and Colleges". As I scrolled through the microfiche of this paper, suddenly I saw our recently purchased house on page

1 There were two city directories during the dates of interest here: *Jules A. Appler's General Directory and Blue Book of Greater San Antonio, 1910, 1912, 1913, 1914*, and *Jules A. Appler's General Directory and Householder Directory of Greater San Antonio, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1918, 1919-20*.

2 Donald E. Everett, *San Antonio's Monte Vista: Architecture and Society in a Gilded Age, 1890 - 1930*, Maverick Publishing Company, 1999, San Antonio, Page 71.

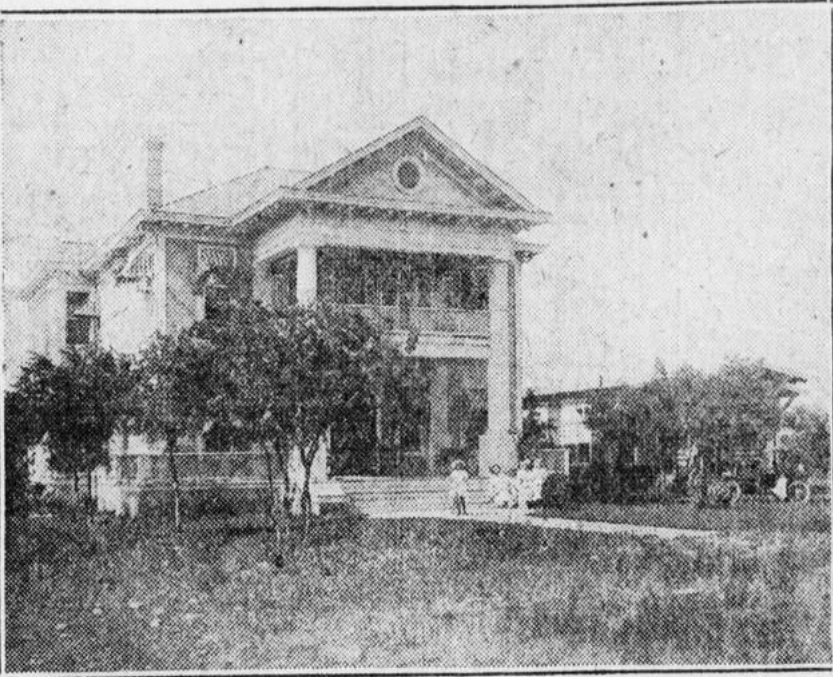
155, looking just as it does today over 100 years later. The image below from the paper shows it formally named as a school and gives a description.

As for the changed house number, some years later it was necessary to renumber the block. Census records for Mattie Lewis show the number was changed from 225 to 241 sometime between 1920 and 1930. At present there is no number 225.

My most important sources have been the San Antonio Express and the San Antonio Light, referred to here as the Express and the Light.

The Lewis Limited School

NO SCHOOL in San Antonio enjoys a better reputation for its health, location and thoroughness than the Lewis Limited, a small, select school on Laurel Heights, one of the most beautiful, delightful and aristocratic suburbs of the city.



Removed, as it is, from the heat, dust and other distractions of the city, the pupils have better opportunities and fewer necessary restrictions in their work than is possible in the down-town districts.

The school was founded twelve years ago by its present principal, Miss Mattie Lewis, who had served a number of years as principal in the public schools of Sherman, Texas.

It is, therefore, a well-graded school from which the pupils can, at any time, enter their respective grades in either the grammar or high schools of the city without examination.

Accommodation for ten boarding girls and forty day pupils is the present limit of the school.

A faculty of twelve competent teachers supply all the necessary requirements for music, art, expression, foreign languages, etc., given in the larger schools.

The classes being small, much careful, individual work is done in all departments from the primary to graduation.

LEWIS SCHOOL.

II. OVERVIEW:

A school teacher named Mattie Lewis tried for at least a decade to make a success of a girls school in the Laurel Heights neighborhood of San Antonio.³ She named the school after herself: The Lewis Limited School. Census forms for the years 1910, 1920, and 1930 give 3 different values for the year of Mattie Lewis's birth: 1862, 1868, and 1860. It is obviously the same person, since all three say she was born in Kentucky and had father and mother born in Michigan and Georgia, respectively. She was listed as "White," "Single," and "Teacher." In the absence of further evidence the most likely explanation is that in 1910 and in 1920 she wanted to be thought of as younger. She was still employed in 1918 as a teacher, but no longer at her own school. In 1920, answering that she was born in 1868 would make her 52, instead of her probable true age of 60, perhaps making her more employable.

During the decade from 1907 to 1917, Mattie Lewis was very active socially, often mentioned in the newspapers as attending luncheons, or parties, or other social gatherings. She was a member of a women's writing group called the "Bohemian Scribblers," which met once a month or so, again as reported in the newspapers. Part of the time she was President of this group, and the group met several times at her home. I found 22 separate notices in the papers about meetings of this group that included her name. The use of the word "Bohemian" in their club's name seems bold to me, implying that they did whatever they wanted.⁴ In the decade from 1907 to 1917, the Light had 110 short articles about this group, which had sections in other cities, one time mentioning a member of the New York City branch.

Like other schools at the time, hers had a school year from mid-September until mid-May. The school included grades through high school. Her school existed in several locations at least from the fall of 1907, all of them since gone except for 241 West Mulberry. For example, a newspaper clipping from 1908 stated: "Miss Mattie Lewis entertained a number of young ladies at her home, 905 San

³ At that time Laurel Heights was roughly the southern portion of the current Monte Vista Historic District.

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary shows the word "Bohemian" was used as early as the 1860s to mean "an artist, or actor, who leads a free, vagabond, or irregular life, despising conventionalities generally."

Pedro avenue, this morning, complimentary to a group of girls of the Lewis school.”⁵ The address 905 San Pedro is now a modern restaurant. In 1910, Mattie Lewis announced in an Express advertisement the "reopening" of the school.⁶ The address given in the ad was 133 West Magnolia Avenue.⁷ In the 1920s, whatever was at 133 Magnolia was replaced by the Magnolia Arms, a 12-unit apartment complex.⁸ A teacher at the Lewis school named Ophelia Brown got married on Tuesday, September 24, 1912 and moved to Austin with her new husband.⁹ A newspaper engagement announcement stated about Miss Brown: “For the past three years she has been teaching music in the Lewis school on Laurel Heights.”¹⁰ Another newspaper account describing the wedding said: “Six of the bride’s former pupils acted as bridesmaids.”¹¹ A newspaper clipping reported: “There will be a box party given at the Plaza tomorrow evening by fourteen girls from the Lewis School on Laurel Heights.”¹² An advertisement gave one of the addresses of the school as “133 Magnolia Avenue.”¹³ All of the above comes before the fall of 1912.

By far Mattie Lewis’s most successful time consisted of the three school years just before her school failed: 1912-13, 1913-14, and 1914-15. During these three periods the school was housed at 225 (now 241) West Mulberry. Also in those three years there was much more in the two newspapers about her school. On March 26, 1912, the Light printed an announcement of a party "at the home of Miss Mattie Lewis, Belknap and Mulberry avenues.”¹⁴ So already before the start of the 1912-13 school year, she was living in the new location for her school. On September 15, 1912, she promoted

5 Light, February 15, 1908, page 3.

6 Express, September 6, 1910, page 9. See Appendix B for this ad.

7 City Directory, San Antonio, 1910 - 11. Under "Private Schools": “Lewis School - 133 W. Magnolia ave. Private school for young ladies. Miss Mattie Lewis, Principal; Miss Ophelia Brown, teacher of music; Mrs. Isabelle Turner, teacher of art.”

8 Everest, page 65.

9 Light, September 22, 1912, page 18.

10 August 8, 1912, page 14.

11 Light, September 25, 1912, page 8.

12 Light, October 19, 1911, page 10.

13 Express, September 6, 1910, page 9.

14 Light, March 26, 1912, page 8.

her school in another ad, talking about a "new permanent home." The school was to open the next day, on the 16th.¹⁵ During that school year the Express gave evidence that the school was successful: there were 12 informative articles in the Express and several in the Light. These articles mentioned 17 students by name as well as 4 adults. (See the On-line Documentation on page 10 for all the articles and ads mentioned here and below, in the Express and the Light.)

On February 14, 1913, Miss Lewis purchased the house at 225 West Mulberry Avenue for \$2090.¹⁶ One must assume that she had arranged at least a year earlier to stay in the house she would later buy. Already on October 11, 1912, the Light noted that she had bought lots 12 and 13, block 6, city block 3095, for \$1500.¹⁷ These lots were next to the lot housing the school at 225 West Mulberry Avenue.

On September 4 and September 9 of 1913 Miss Lewis placed ads for her school in the Express. These would be ads for what was to be her second successful school year. The school was to open on September 15, 1913. These ads mentioned, among other things, "accommodations for twelve boarding students," and "new buildings with sleeping porch, sun parlor and other conveniences." This was of course the new location, the house at 225 West Mulberry Avenue. During that school year, 1913-1914, there were 44 informative articles in the newspapers and 28 girls were mentioned by name along with 26 adults.

Before the start of her third successful school year, Miss Lewis placed ads in the Express on July 23, and September 3 and 13, 1914. In addition to what the previous ads said, these ads included "Two blocks from San Pedro car line, corner Belknap and Mulberry Ave." and "References required." The school opened on September 14, 1914. For this third school year, 1914-1915, there were 7 informative articles in the paper that mentioned 36 girls by name along with 2 adults.

¹⁵ Express, September 15, 1912, page 30.

¹⁶ Bexar County records, lot 14, block 6, city block 3059. Light, Real Estate Transfers, February 15, 1913, page 9.

¹⁷ Light, Real Estate Transfers, October 11, 1912, page 10.

Just past the end of this third school year, 1914-1915, Miss Lewis placed a very large ad in the special edition of the Express, on May 20, 1915. (This is the picture at the start of this application.) Miss Lewis also placed ads in the Express on September 2, 3, 5, and 9 of 1915 for the next school year, which would have been 1915-1916. One of these ads mentioned two teachers by name and field: "Harold Morris in charge of music department; Miss Ida Holman in art." The ad also explicitly gave the address as "225 West Mulberry Avenue."

In spite of these ads and all the clear evidence of Miss Lewis's efforts, there is no further mention of her school in either paper. One can assume that there was not enough enrollment to carry out even part of the 1915-1916 school year, although this is not known for sure. The City Directory no longer listed the school for 1917, and listed "apts" under the entry for 1918, so Miss Lewis had given up the school and was renting rooms in her house at 225 Mulberry Avenue. On August 25, 1918, an ad appeared for a different kind of school: the Briggs' School of Expression and Dramatic Art.¹⁸ This ad mentioned Mattie Lewis as the teacher of English and Psychology. In fact, already on February 5, 1917, a note in the Light said the Briggs' School had an "open house" where "pupils will present scenes from Hamlet."¹⁹ The note explicitly mentions Mattie Lewis, so she was successfully employed there during the 1916-17 school year.

As for why the school failed, one strong factor would be the five successful private schools for girls in San Antonio at the time: Bonn-Avon, Mulholland, St. Mary's Hall, Thomas, and Wasson. In a brief summary, each of these schools went through high school, had been established for some time, and continued after the Lewis school failed. They made a very difficult competition for Mattie Lewis. (See the On-line Documentation on page 10 for more about these schools.) Also, in my only interview with someone associated with the school, namely a woman who took a summer school class at the

¹⁸ Express, August 25, 1918, page 13.

¹⁹ Light, February 5, 1917, page 6.

school, she said "I went to Travis School and did not attend the Lewis School. Mattie tried to talk my parents into sending me to the school, but they didn't agree to this." At least in this case Miss Lewis was trying to recruit a summer school student for her regular school.

III. HISTORICAL/CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:

As far as I know, when I started researching the Lewis Limited School in 1990, the former student I interviewed, Mrs. Pardue, was the only person alive then who remembered where the school had been, and only the few people I've talked with even knew the school existed. Anyone reading Everett's history of Monte Vista would assume that there had been a school, but that the building which housed it no longer existed. If they looked for the old house number 225, they would find that at present there is no such number. When I discuss the history of the school, I find people fascinated to hear about a successful girls school in Monte Vista, even if its success was limited to an initial period and three good years, followed by a decline and closure.

My claim is that the school and the final building in which it was housed are of considerable historic significance, but these had been forgotten until our purchase of the house and my research into the history of the school. This school deserves much wider recognition and appreciation as an important part of the history of Monte Vista and of San Antonio.

In fact, this school was the first high school in the Laurel Heights neighborhood. In 1912 there were only two other schools in Laurel Heights: St. Anthony Catholic School, which opened in 1909 as an elementary school, and St. Anthony Catholic High School, which opened in 1903 as a junior seminary. The Lewis school was the only option in Laurel Heights for high school girls. Mattie Lewis attempted to play on this advantage by writing in ads: "Removed as it is from the heat, dust and other distractions of the city,...."; "Ideally located"; "Locality unsurpassed". In 1916, St. Mary's Hall moved

to the large house at San Pedro and Woodlawn, and the Lewis school would have lost its monopoly on location, but by that time the school had already failed.

The area of Monte Vista is now a San Antonio Historic District, as well as a United States Historic District. The house at 241 West Mulberry is of historic significance just for the honor of its location in such important districts. It is the only remaining location of the historic Lewis school, and was easily the most successful one. The house is an example of a Greek Revival style, with the front somewhat similar to the John Wood Mansion.²⁰ A major addition was built on the back of the house between 1905 and 1915, with evidence from the crawl space and from the inside of the house. After the addition the house had a large living room, dining room, den, kitchen, 6 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, and 5 fireplaces. Perhaps the most interesting part of the interior is a wood plank in the ceiling of the den with the words "From Petrich-Saur Lumber Co Phones 30-30" in black. About 40 years ago during a remodeling this plank was left exposed. There are similar markings on planks in the ceiling of the unfinished attic. The writing was clearly used to identify a load of wood that was delivered.

Mattie Lewis herself was an important part of the education establishment in San Antonio for many years. As mentioned in Section II above, her influence extended far beyond the three successful years that I have emphasized here. During her three most successful years, at least 60 separate girls were identified in various newspaper notices as attending the school.

IV. DOCUMENTATION:

A couple of years after we bought the house, around 1990, I decided to research the history of the school, using references to it in the San Antonio Express. The paper at that time was printed with a small type-size, using seven columns per page, with a large number of pages, and my access was

²⁰ wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wood_Mansion

microfiche, so the search was not easy. The paper had a regular section titled "Society Notes" that had subtitles such as "Events of the Day," "Coming Events," "Recital," "Entertainments," "School Dance," "Lewis School," "Class Day Exercises," "Lewis School Recital," "Lewis School Calendar," "School Recital," and "School Entertainment." I found 15 of these sections that concerned the Lewis Limited School. It's very important to realize that the Express (as well as the Light) did not charge for including these "social" news items, but Mattie Lewis had to pay for the ads for her school. Ads were sometimes in a section "San Antonio Schools and Colleges."

The sections had interesting information, but of special importance to me were names of girls attending the School. In the end I had a list of 60 separate students who had attended the school. These names were very old and were of course all birth names, not married names. Eventually I contacted a local woman named Virginia Fichtner who was friends with a number of elderly people in San Antonio. She and her friends were able to identify 17 of the girls, most with married last names. All these were deceased except for two who were in dementia. So 1990 was just a little too late to contact any of these former students.

I also made up a list of names of adults mentioned in the sections. There are 27 of these people, including the Rev. John Ridout, who was the new Rector of Christ Church at the time.²¹ He gave a benediction at a Lewis school ceremony held outside the school.

Ms. Fichtner also gave me the name of a woman who had attended summer school at the Lewis Limited School. I was able to interview her on the phone.

In 2019 I started up my research again after a thirty-year hiatus, looking in the old editions of the Express, as well as old copies of the Light — the two competing newspapers in San Antonio at the time of the Lewis school. Both these are available on-line now, the Express through a cooperative Texas archive, and the Light from NewspaperArchive.com. From these two sources I now have 130

21 Light, May 22, 1914, page 10; Express, May 22, 1914, page 8.

newspaper items altogether that mention either the Lewis school or Mattie Lewis. Here is the breakdown of the types of items:

- o Items about the Lewis school, often mentioning Mattie Lewis: 86
- o Items about Mattie Lewis not related to the school: 26
- o Advertisements for the school: 18

Other sources included the Bexar County record of Mattie Lewis's purchase of the property at 225 Mulberry Avenue. The San Antonio city directories provided useful information.

ON-LINE DOCUMENTATION (all of it is accessible using the PDF file just below):

<http://nealrwagner.com/Lewis.pdf> (This is the document you are reading.)

Download this PDF in a browser. The 5 links below may work directly. If not, use copy-paste.

All 130 newspaper items:

<http://nealrwagner.com/house/application/items.all/items.html>

Schools that competed with the Lewis school:

<http://nealrwagner.com/house/application/schools/schools.html>

The Census data about Mattie Lewis:

<http://nealrwagner.com/house/application/census/census.html>

City directories:

<http://nealrwagner.com/house/application/city.dir/city.dir.html>

The record of Mattie Lewis's purchase of her school:

http://nealrwagner.com/house/application/bexar_records/bexar.html

Earlier and longer version of the application: more pictures and data:

<http://nealrwagner.com/Lewis.early.pdf>