

# In Memoriam

Virginia McAlester, 1943–2020

BY PETER SIMEK

**T**HERE ARE MANY WAYS TO DESCRIBE VIRGINIA SAVAGE McAlester. She was an author, a preservationist, an architectural historian, an activist, the founder and leader of multiple nonprofits, and a dedicated daughter, sister, and mother. McAlester is perhaps best known for her monumental *A Field Guide to American Houses*, which, after its 1984 publication, did nothing less than anoint McAlester as the “Queen of Historic Preservation.” The book has topped architectural bestseller lists for so long that the influential site Curbed called her the “most popular architecture writer in America.”

McAlester’s book appeared at a time when, as architectural historian William Seale told the *New York Times*, developers charged like “wild bulls” over the city’s old neighborhoods. “When she started broadening her preservation efforts,” Seale said, “few, if any, in Dallas had the slightest interest in historic preservation, thinking their history too new to be worthwhile.”

McAlester’s appreciation of that overlooked history grew from her family’s roots. She was born on Swiss Avenue, that grande dame of Dallas boulevards, in a house that was purchased in 1921 by her grandfather, William Harris, an attorney who had led the impeachment of Texas Governor James “Pa” Ferguson in 1917. McAlester’s father, Wallace Savage, was the mayor of Dallas from 1949 to 1951. But it was McAlester’s mother, Dorothy Savage, who would inspire a passion for preserving the magnificent homes that lined what was Dallas’ first paved street.

By the 1960s, Swiss Avenue, once home to Dallas’ movers and shakers, was in decline as the city’s wealthier residents fled to the suburbs. McAlester’s mother began to buy homes on Swiss that had fallen into disrepair and worked to rehabilitate them. (In total, McAlester would live in five Swiss Avenue homes throughout her life.) But her mother’s success at preservation was piecemeal at best. McAlester, who graduated from Radcliffe and studied architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, saw that historic preservation required more than one-off efforts to repair old houses. Historic preservation was as much a social challenge as it was an architectural one, and the city’s old houses and neighborhoods would be saved only when the neighborhoods themselves were improved.

McAlester established a fund that allowed her to broaden the scope of her mother’s preservation efforts, buying and rehabilitating more than 20 houses in Munger Place. Some of these houses represented the first time that mortgage lender Fannie Mae made loans on old homes in Dallas’ inner city. But McAlester realized

that to really make a difference, she needed a tool that could place Dallas’ older houses in their appropriate architectural and historical context and thus prove their value to residents and banks alike.

“I was thinking, because we had a tree guide, because we had a bird guide, I assumed there was something like that for houses,” she told Curbed in 2019. “But there was nothing that really covered the country and particularly nothing after 1900. All those early modern houses—Craftsman houses, Italian Renaissance houses—had not been surveyed.”

Unlike many architectural studies, McAlester’s book didn’t focus on exemplary architectural showpieces, but sought to document the scope and significance of the great variety of commonplace designs that define the places where people live. For example, in a 2015 update to the *Field Guide*, she coined two new phrases

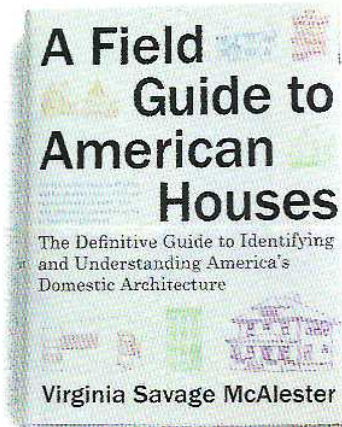
to describe emerging architectural styles: “21st-century modern” for the sleek, angular, uncluttered structures that dominate the pages of shelter magazines; and “millennium mansions” for the thrown-up ex-urban behemoths more commonly derided as “McMansions.” For McAlester, it was important to understand the highs and lows of design because both architectural visions shape our experience and concept of American communities.

The book—like all of McAlester’s works—grew out of her hands-on preservation experience. Her work on Swiss Avenue led to the creation of Preservation Dallas and the designation of Swiss Avenue as Dallas’ first historic district, in 1973. Her work on Fair Park led to the establishment of the Friends of Fair Park. In addition to the *Field Guide*, McAlester authored or co-authored *The Making of a Historic District*, about her Swiss

Avenue efforts; *A Field Guide to America’s Historic Neighborhoods*; and *The Homes of the Park Cities, Dallas: Great American Suburbs*.

Historic preservation in Dallas didn’t simply require careful research and skilled political organization—it took real grit. McAlester once parked the family station wagon, with her daughter inside, in front of a bulldozer primed to demolish a home (she saved the home). *Dallas Morning News* architecture critic Mark Lamster wrote on her passing: “A petite woman with a blonde bob, she had an innate sense of propriety and a beatific smile that hinted at a heritage of Southern gentility. She appeared fragile, but her looks belied a tough constitution and intellect, qualities that together made her a successful advocate for the causes she championed.”

Dallas has lost a giant. Virginia Savage McAlester passed away from myelofibrosis on April 9. She was 76. **E**





**PROFILE IN COURAGE:**  
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