

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NEW ORLEANS
1329 Jackson Avenue

Architectural Rating: Blue
Construction Date: 1853-54, facade reworked in 1873.

Nomination Information

Date: September 13, 1984
Nominated by: Camille Strachan
Seconded by: Jane Brooks and Ron Purcell

Site Description

Square 178, Lots 6-12
Fourth Municipal District, Twelfth Assessment District
Zoning: RM-1

Lot Sizes: Lot 6 measures 28'4" front on Jackson Avenue by 120' in depth, between equal and parallel lines. Lot 7 and Lot 8 both measure 28'4"6" front on Jackson Avenue by 120' in depth, between equal and parallel lines. Lot 9 forms the corner of Jackson Avenue and Coliseum Street and measures 28'5" front on Jackson Avenue by 120' in depth and front on Coliseum Street, between equal and parallel lines. Lot 10 measures 26'6"7" front on Coliseum Street by 127'9"5" in depth, between equal and parallel lines, and it adjoins the rear property lines of lots 6-9. Lots 11 and 12 each measure 26'7" front on Coliseum Street by 127'9"5" depth, between equal and parallel lines.

Owner: Trinity Episcopal Church, New Orleans

The nomination of this property was based on its architectural significance, its association with two locally recognized architects, and its association with events in local history and historic personages. Each of the four areas of criteria used in determining landmark qualification, as outlined in City Ordinance #5992 M.C.S., will be examined on an individual basis in order to produce information upon which a final decision will be made whether or not to designate the property.

Architectural Significance

Trinity Episcopal Church has stood in its present location at the edge of the Garden District, on the corner of Jackson Avenue and Coliseum Street, since 1853. The church has actually been organized since July, 1847, when the parish was incorporated under the name "The Church of the Holy Trinity, Lafayette" The name reflected the fact that that area was still part of the city of Lafayette, which was later annexed to the city of New Orleans in 1852. The name of the church was changed to "Trinity Episcopal Church, New Orleans," in April of 1853.¹

During its first years of existence, Trinity Church operated out of a small chapel at the corner of Second and Constance (then Live Oak) Streets.

Because the city of New Orleans and the city of Lafayette were experiencing a period of unparalleled growth and prosperity, often called the "Golden Age" in the city's history, the church soon felt a need to expand. In 1851, under the direction of the Rev. A. F. Dobb, the church purchased six lots of ground at the corner of Jackson and Coliseum (then Plaquemine) Streets for \$5,500. Jackson Avenue was a main thoroughfare, complete with railroad tracks down the middle at that time, and it was the location of many new homes for wealthy businessmen, particularly cotton merchants. Trinity began planning a larger, permanent home for their congregation by engaging the architect-builder George Purves to design a new masonry structure for them, which was to have 122 pews and measure 110' by 63'. Perhaps because of specifications given by the church itself, or perhaps just because of the pleasure of the architect, the church was designed in the Gothic style.

Gothic architecture first developed in France around 1140. Two of the earliest Gothic Cathedrals are at Rheims and Notre Dame de Paris. The innovations particular to this style include the pointed arch, the emphasis on height and delicacy of structural elements, and the use of buttresses to counteract the strong outward thrust of the extreme height and the long, arched central sections of these structures. Stained glass, "the most thrilling of the medieval crafts"¹ was employed extensively in windows as the architecture evolved to reduced wall surfaces and lightened interiors, both literally and figuratively. The piers supporting the arched nave, or central section of the church, became thinner as they grew taller, and were often arranged in clusters.

Gothic architecture experienced a revival from 1830-1880 in England, and from around 1850-1910 in New Orleans. Alexander Davis designed the first documented example of a Gothic Revival house in America in 1832, and published a plan book called Rural Residences in 1837. Other pattern books were published in 1842 and 1850 by Andrew Jackson Downing, who had a major influence on the popularization of this style because of his public speaking on the subject. During this time, the Gothic style came to be considered by many the morally superior form of architecture, and many of the churches of the era were designed in that style, as well as government buildings such as Britain's Houses of Parliament. Trinity Church of New York, designed by Richard Upjohn and complete in 1846, is considered one of the best "neo-Gothic" churches in the United States.

Trinity Church of New Orleans was completed in 1853, at a cost of \$35,000. It has a plaster stucco exterior, a high steeply pitched roof that is an earmark of any Gothic design, and eight stepped buttresses along each side rising to a point above the main wall surface. Buttresses are structural elements used to counteract the outward pressure of the nave, and they became key design elements as well, even in they did not have an important structural role. In this case the buttresses are broader at ground level and narrow as they go up. Between each of the buttresses is a tall thin window with a pointed arch. The shape of the arch is accentuated by the drip molding or hood molding above it. A simple band of horizontal molding adds some plastic relief to the area above the windows

Although the design of Trinity Church exhibits so many of the classic characteristics of the Gothic style, it is not a flamboyant building. There is no excessive ornamentation, such as would be seen in later French or early English revival examples, nor are there exaggerated structural elements. The feel is that of an "Americanized" version of the European prototypes.

Originally, the Jackson Avenue facade of the building featured a tall gable end with a large pointed arched window, flanked by twin octagonal towers. The gable was crowned by a pinnacle matching those above the buttresses. Three Gothic arches formed the entrance. In 1873 the towers were found to be structurally unsafe, and the entire facade was redesigned by the architect Charles Lewis Hillger. The new treatment focused on a single large square tower and entry portico projecting from the front of it. The top corners of the tower have pinnacles, and a shingled steeple rises above the walls bearing a simple cross. This tower is somewhat more ornate than the original design, with the repeated use of a trefoil or clover-like design referring symbolically to the church's name and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

The wooden doorways into the church are recessed behind the large Gothic arch of the entry porch. The doors themselves recall Medieval forerunners in their use of wooden battens and large hinges. A flight of stairs leads up to the doors because the main level of the church is actually raised above a one-story "basement" level, used for administrative offices, classrooms, etc. Above the doors are stained glass panels and a rose window, which illuminate the narthex, the vestibule between the entryway and the church proper. A cross sits atop the roof of the entry portico, and beneath that a trefoil is incised within a circle. Above the portico three lancet windows, tall with pointed arches, contain stained glass and illustrate the preaching of St. Paul. They are made of Cathedral glass from Boston.⁷ The upper portion of the tower, with a triangular pediment on each face, is ornamented with many variations and sizes of trefoils incised within circles.

Although many Gothic churches were built in the form of an elongated cross, Trinity's interior plan is that of a simpler basilica, meaning that there are no side arms or transepts. The roof design and the relationship of the central nave to the side aisles classify Trinity as a "hall church" or "hallenkirche", because the nave and the aisles are the same height. A somewhat more traditional Gothic arrangement would have had the central section rising above the sides, with a row of clerestory windows above the aisle roofs. Among other hall churches in New Orleans are the landmarks of St. Stephens and St. Mary's Assumption Churches. The wooden ceiling structure in Trinity, which replaced a stucco ceiling in 1883, has a very low pitch, not high and vaulted like most European Gothic interiors. Relatively simple vaulted areas above each of the eight side windows form a more typical ceiling above the aisles. The vaults spring from ornamental bosses decorated with leaf motifs.

The tall side windows at Trinity rise to pointed arches between the vaulted areas, and all contain stained glass scenes depicting events in the life of

Jesus Christ. They date from different time periods, three having been installed in 1888, several more in the 1890's, four others in the years from 1923-25. Several of the windows are dedicated to former rectors of Trinity who went on to become Bishops; one is dedicated to John H. Maginnis, a Vestryman at Trinity who owned the Greek Revival mansion at the corner of Prytania Street and Jackson Avenue, and who was killed by lightning on the beach in Ocean Springs Mississippi at the age of forty-four. His funeral was held at Trinity in 1889. Three windows nearest the narthex were made by I. C. Tiffany, one other comes from Boston.⁸

In 1867 the church was enlarged by moving the chancel back thirty-two feet at a cost of \$25,000, because the congregation had grown so much that the rector's report of 1865 stated "though chairs and benches occupy every available place, seats cannot be found for those who seek to attend the services."⁹ The chancel is the area of the church where the clergy and choir sit during religious services. In Trinity it is raised slightly above the level of the main church and separated visually at the sides by a fine carved wooden screen with Gothic designed tracery. Three large Gothic arches, supported on clustered columns in the Gothic tradition, mark the transition from the high ceiling of the nave to the lower area of the chancel. Wood is employed throughout the chancel in wainscoting, a carved pulpit and lectern, the main altar, carved with a scene of the Last Supper, and four bas-relief angels flanking the altar. The same sort of carved wainscoting is used down the side aisles of the church, with the design motif repeated on the ends and fronts of pews to tie the overall ornamental scheme together.

About the same time the church was enlarged, fundraising was begun for the large window we see today above the main altar. The window, ordered from England and finished in 1874, was said to be "one of the most beautiful in any American church at that time."¹⁰ It is divided into thirds horizontally and vertically, and displays three scenes - the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and, at the top, the Resurrection. The window rises the entire height of the chancel wall, and is the focal point of the church ornamentation. The organization responsible for financing that window was the church's first women's group, called the Bishop Polk Society in honor of the fifth rector of Trinity, Leonidas Polk, who served from 1855-60, and who was the first Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana.

As would be expected of a growing organization, the Church continued to add to and improve its property through the years. In 1909, a parish house was constructed behind the church, designed by Samuel Stanhope Labouisse, Trinity's architect for many years. At the same time, new pews, choir stalls, and an altar were installed in the main church, which are still in use today. In 1939 a chapel was built at the Coliseum Street entrance to the parish house.

Architects

The designer of Trinity Church was George Purves, a native of Scotland who came to New Orleans from New York in 1847. He was a prominent architect-builder who also designed the Odd Fellows Hall, formerly on Lafayette Square, in 1849-50. He constructed the Second Presbyterian Church, also on Lafayette Square, which was designed by Irishman Henry Howard in 1855 after fire destroyed the First Presbyterian Church on that site. The Howard church was designed in a high Gothic Revival style, more flamboyant than Purves's own designs, but it was demolished in 1938 for the construction of the Federal Building. Purves also participated in the rebuilding of the Greek Revival St. Charles Hotel after it was damaged by fire in 1851, working with Isaiah Rogers and other architects. The brick Greek Revival residence at 1135 South Rampart was an example of Purves's domestic designs, built in 1853. Trinity Church is the only large scale work of his that remains, and it is a tribute to his ability as an architect. Purves died in 1883.

Charles Lewis Hillger designed the facade and single tower standing today, which replaced Purves's original towers in 1873. He also designed the handsome Lafayette Fire Insurance Co. building at 2123 Magazine Street in 1869, the Byzantine-style Temple Sinai, formerly on Carondelet near Howard Street, 1328 Felicitey Street, and several other buildings on Magazine Street and throughout the city.

Social, Political and Economic Significance

The history of Trinity Church parallels the history of the city of New Orleans. The church was begun by an Episcopal Missionary in 1847 in a rapidly-growing "American" suburb of the city, an area far from the few other established Protestant churches at that time. As the Garden District and Lower Garden District grew and became the sites of many lovely homes, the church was built as a monumental addition to the neighborhoods. In 1853, as the building was nearing completion, the church lost one of its best early leaders, Reverend A. F. Dobb, in what is considered the city's worst yellow fever epidemic. During the period after the Civil War, several of the rectors of Trinity resigned their positions after refusing to obey the new mandate to pray for the President of the United States. During the Great Depression of the 1930's, a soup kitchen was established at Trinity which fed over sixty thousand meals to unemployed men and women. Through the years many prominent citizens of New Orleans have been baptized, educated (Trinity School teaches grades kindergarten through eight), or had their funerals held at Trinity Church. It is intricately tied to the history of this city.

Historic Personages

Trinity Church has had many outstanding individuals numbered among its clergyman and parishoners during its 139 year history. Among its more famous rectors is Leonidas Polk, who was consecrated as the first Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana in 1841. Bishop Polk led the congregation at Trinity Church from 1855 to 1860, when he resigned to accomplish his goal of establishing the Episcopal University of the South at Sewanee. Later he became a general in the Confederate Army and was killed in battle at Pine Mountain, Georgia in 1864.

Dr. Beverly Warner was another outstanding rector. He led the church from 1893-1910, during which time he established the first Settlement House in the south, Kingsley House. Kingsley House is still successful today as a United Way Agency.

Other rectors of Trinity who have gone on to become Bishops are:

Rev. Henry N. Pierce (served at Trinity in 1854), later Bishop of Arkansas; Rev. John W. Beckwith (1865-68), later Bishop of Georgia; Rev. John Galleher (1869-71), later Bishop of Louisiana; Rev. Samuel Harris (1871-75), later Bishop of Michigan; Rev. Hugh M. Thompson (1876-83), later Bishop of Mississippi; and Rev. Thomas F. Gailor (1893), later Bishop of Tennessee.¹²

The list of prominent citizens who have been members of Trinity could go on and on. A random sampling of the members includes, in no particular order: Frank T. Howard, a philanthropist, involved in the Louisiana lottery around the turn of the century, after whom a public school was named; John H. Maginnis, one of the founders of Maginnis Cotton Seed Oil Mill & Soap Works, considered, according to the Times Picayune, "one of the wealthiest and most successful men in the south"; Ambrose Skardon, whose family had a famous grocery store in a fine building at the corner of Felicity and Prytania streets; James J. Irby, businessman; the Downman family; Rufus McIlhenny of Avery Island fame; Charles E. Fenner, president of Fenner & Bean Investment Company; George Q. Whitely, president of Whitney Bank; Charles Farwell, who was instrumental in the sugar business; Esmond Phelps, attorney and publisher of the Times Picayune; the Lapeyre family; the Vaccaro family; the Strachan family; various educators including Cynthia Littlejohn, the Randolph sisters, and Elworth Woodward; Eugene Pennebaker, an official with the Texas and Pacific Railroad; attorneys such as John Chaffe, George Terriberry, Judge Monroe; and members of the Buckner and Eustis families who occupied the mansion just across the street that later became Soule Business College.¹³

Staff Recommendation

The staff recommends for the designation of Trinity Episcopal Church as a landmark, based on architectural significance, association with two recognized architects, and identification with historic personages and events in local history. Trinity Church was designed in the Gothic Revival style, and exemplifies well the characteristics of this movement that was so important in the mid-nineteenth century, both in the United States and in England. The architect for the church was George Purves, who participated in several large-scale projects in New Orleans, most of which, unfortunately, have been demolished. Trinity is an important tribute to his talent. Charles Lewis Hilliger, better represented by works still in existence, designed a tower and entry portico in 1873 to replace the unstable original towers. Trinity and its members have participated in most of the important events that have occurred since its completion in 1853. (See Historic Personages and Social, Political and Economic History).

Footnotes

1. 115 Years of Trinity Church: 1847-1962. New Orleans, 1962
2. Trinity Church: One Hundred Years in New Orleans. Trinity Historical Committee, 1948. P. 12.
- 3; John Julius Norwich. Great Architecture of the World. Random House, Inc. 1975. P. 115.
4. Great Architecture of the World , P.212
5. Trinity Church: One Hundred Years in New Orleans. P. 12
6. Ibid. P. 25
7. Trinity Episcopal Church, Stained Glass Windows. New Orleans.
8. Ibid.
9. Trinity Church: One Hundred Years in New Orleans. P. 22
10. 115 Years of Trinity Church: 1847-1962.
11. Trinity Church: One Hundred Years in New Orleans.
12. Ibid.
13. Information obtained from George King Logan, Chairman, Trinity Historical Committee.