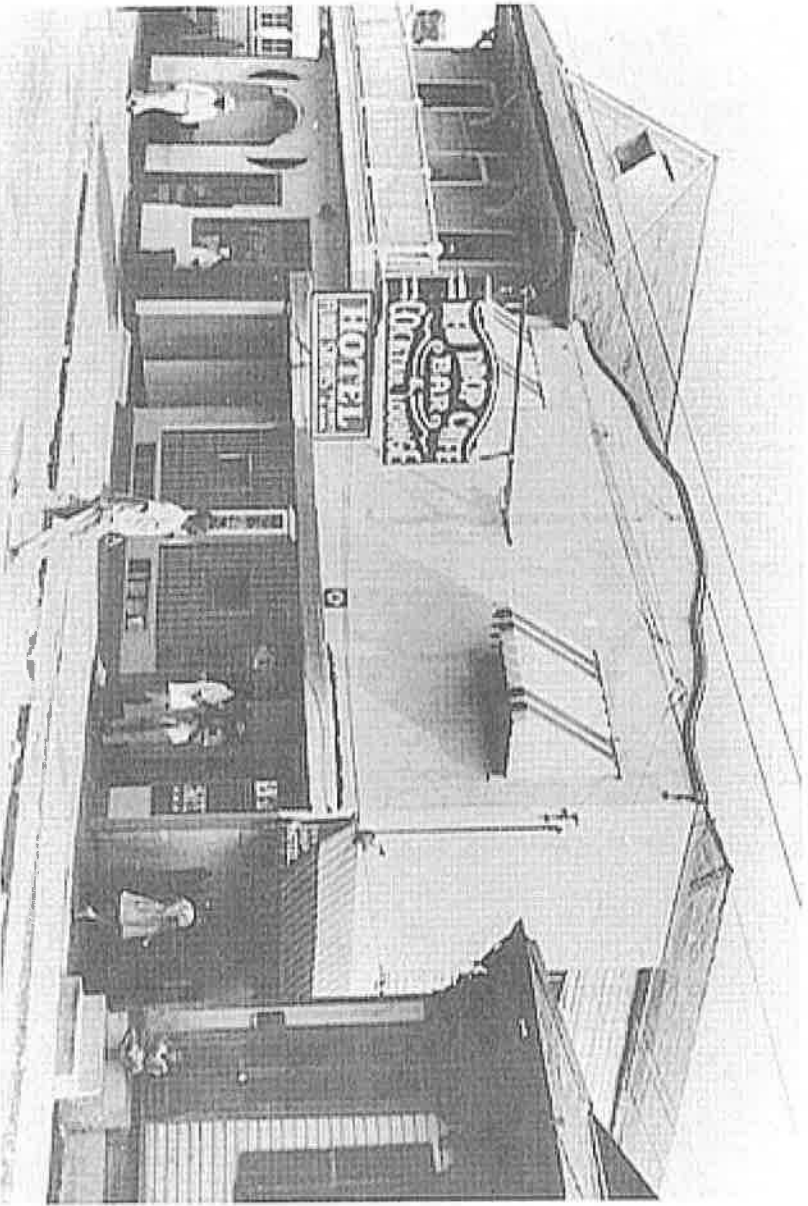


## New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission

### Landmark Designation Report

January 14, 2010



1. Historic Photograph of the Dew Drop Inn, c. 1950.

From web site:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/7388762@N03/2346173516/>

The Dew Drop Inn  
2836 LaSalle Street

**The Dew Drop Inn  
2836 LaSalle Street**

**Landmark Designation Report**  
**January 14, 2010**

**Architectural Rating:**

Green

**Construction Date:**

Unknown

**Architect:**

Unknown

**Site Description**

Lot 2 and Lot 3

**Municipal District:**

4

**Assessment District:**

12

**Zoning:**

B-2

**Owner:**

Laura P. Jackson  
2316 Upperline Street  
New Orleans, LA 70118

**Nomination Information**

**Date Nominated:**

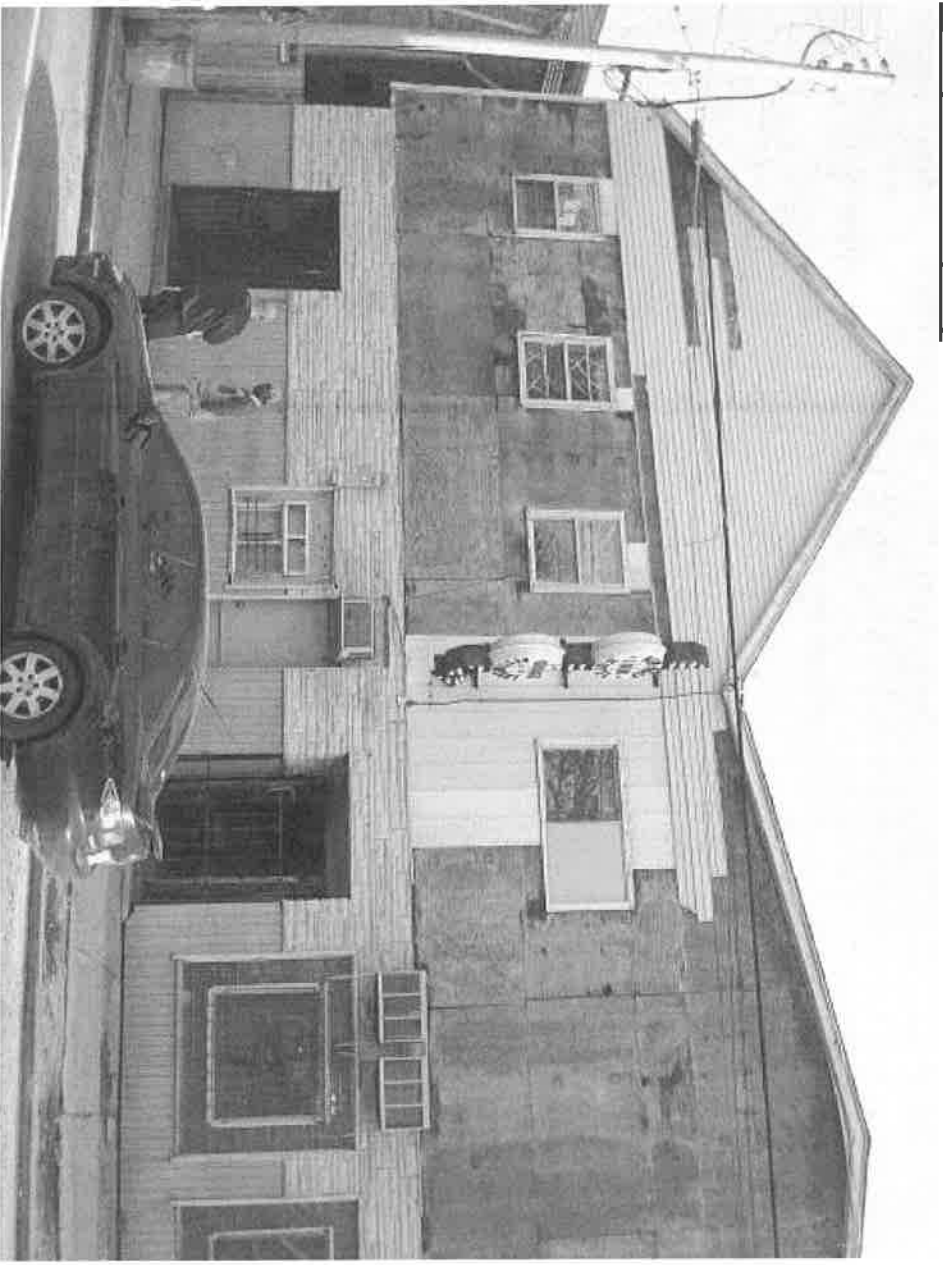
December 14, 2004

**Recommended by:**

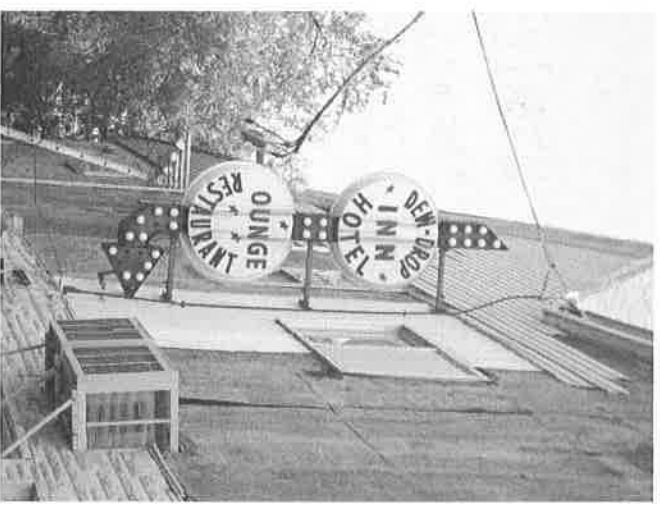
Owner

The nomination of this property was based upon its social significance. City Ordinance No. 5992 MCS defines a Landmark or Landmark site as: An unimproved parcel of ground (landmark site) or such parcel with improvements or such improvements without grounds (landmark), wheresoever located in the City of New Orleans, subject to the jurisdiction of the Historic District Landmarks Commission, of particular historic, architectural, or cultural significance, which said parcel or parcels, plus its improvements, if any, 1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community; or 2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state, or local history; or 3) Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type, specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or indigenous materials or craftsmanship; or 4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.

## History of the Property

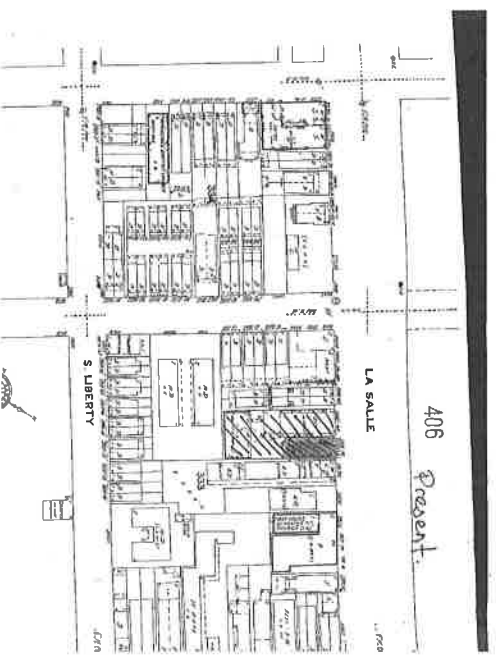
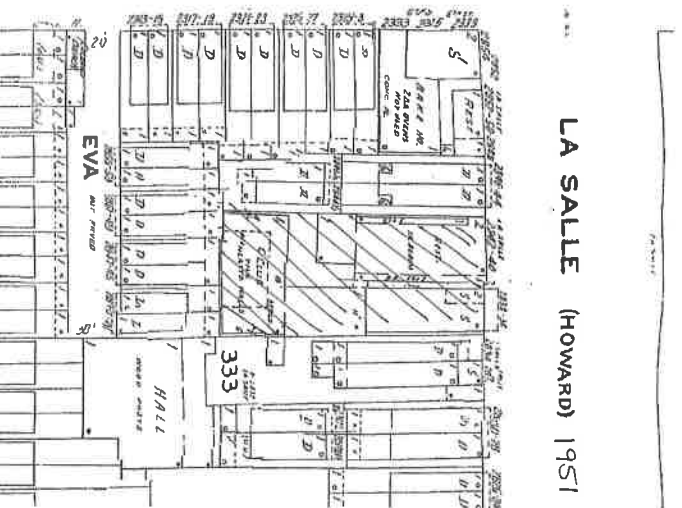


*2-4. Current condition of the Dew Drop Inn.  
Photos taken 12-16-09.*



Established sometime between 1909 and 1939, the Dew Drop Inn consisted of a restaurant, a hotel, and a musical venue located in the rear. The exact date the buildings were erected is unknown. They did not exist when the 1909 Sanborn map was published. The 1951 Sanborn map shows them in the same configuration as they exist today (see images 5 and 6). The hotel consisted of a two story, gable roofed, craftsman style house with a balcony and large bracketed overhang. The restaurant building once featured a plaster second story with a Spanish Revival style parapet. The first floor had two large glass block windows and two recessed entrances (see photo 1 on cover).

Page 1 of 1



6. Property footprint illustrated in the 1994 Sanborn Map.

<http://sanborn.wmi.com/lanboxray/image?damage?name=sketches/real/008&id=3370&L=12/17/2009>

5. Property footprint illustrated in the 1951 Sanborn Map.

Currently, the two buildings that comprise the Dew Drop Inn are covered in plywood, a stone veneer and vinyl siding. The balcony of the hotel is missing and new window openings have been installed (see photo 2-4).

The history of the Dew Drop Inn is best described in an article published By Jeff Hannusch, excerpted below.

"The South's Swankiest Night Spot: The Legend of the Dew Drop Inn"

From 1945 to 1970, the Dew Drop was synonymous with top flight Black entertainment, drawing singers, musicians, dancers and comedians like a magnet. *"The Dew Drop was just it,"* contends Joseph August, better known as the renowned blues singer "Mr. Google Eyes", who often worked the club as a singer and an emcee. *"It was the foundation for musicians in New Orleans. Whether you were from out of town or from the city, your goal was the Dew Drop. If you couldn't get a gig at the Dew Drop, you weren't about nothing."*



Even though the club would embrace the lives and careers of thousands of people, the Dew Drop is really the story of one man, Frank G. Painia. Born in the Iberville Parish town of Plaquemine on June 4, 1911, Painia moved to New Orleans with his wife Feddie and two young children in 1934. A barber by trade, with a seventh grade education, he left Plaquemine to escape the poverty of depression-weary

rural Louisiana. Upon arrival in New Orleans, the family moved in with Painia's sister, and he became a partner in a barber shop on LaSalle Street. When the shop was razed a couple of years later to make way for the Magnolia Projects, Painia opened his own shop across the street, on the corner of LaSalle and Sixth.

Always one to spot and take advantage of an opportunity, Painia soon bought out an oriental businessman who owned a bar and grocery store just two doors away on LaSalle Street. He renovated the building to accommodate his barber shop and a restaurant, which was added to the barroom. To help him operate the business, brothers Paul, an excellent cook, and Easton, a bartender, also moved in from Plaquemine. Dubbed the Dew Drop Inn, the establishment opened in April of 1939.

Although business was rough from the beginning, according to Painia's daughter, Laura Jackson, who eventually served as the club's cashier and bookkeeper, "Daddy just had a mind for business. He was a real go-getter. He was always expanding and moving things around. He had a chance to buy the building next door and saw a way to turn a profit. The war was on, so there were a lot of people in transit and a hotel was going to do well because there wasn't a quality place for Blacks to stay then. So he built a hotel next door. The Dew Drop is actually two buildings."

Even though Painia's daughter pointed out "the place was really jumping during the war," the Dew Drop hadn't yet begun to feature entertainment. However, another business venture for the elder Painia surfaced. He began booking touring bands for concerts into Booker T. Washington Auditorium and the Coliseum Arena. Because New Orleans hardly had a suitable nightclub that was capable of handling the nation's top Black entertainers, such as Louis Jordan and Jimmy Lunceford, more often than not, Painia's shows were quite profitable.

Since the entertainers he hired already ate and slept at his establishment, and he could avoid paying rent and taxes at other halls by utilizing his own space, presenting shows at the Dew Drop was a logical progression. Painia began experimenting with local entertainment in the lounge, featuring artists such as singer Blanche Thomas and guitarist Erving Charles. Painia found a great demand for live music. So, as the war in the South Pacific was grinding to an explosive halt, workmen in New Orleans were putting the finishing touches on the latest addition to the Dew Drop, the club destined to be New Orleans' best known night spot.

"Ssh, ssh," whispered a headline in the August 14, 1945 "Louisiana Weekly". *"Don't tell anyone, but the Dew Drop Inn is really coming up with that Northern stuff in the next week or three. Mr. Frank Painia, one of the city's better negro business men, will see to it that there will be a decent dancehall for his people."*

Nicknamed the "Groove Room," by October of 1945 the "Louisiana Weekly" was already referring to the spot as "New Orleans' swankiest nightclub." Featuring two shows nightly on weekends and an amateur contest on Friday evenings, the Dew Drop produced the kind of entertainment that backed up its reputation.

A typical show which was advertised in the December 21, 1945 edition of the Louisiana Weekly featured: Joe Turner - "king of the blues who will be back with a new sack of new songs for Christmas, along with a brand new show"; Bobby Grant - "just back from St. Louis, nationally known female impersonator"; Iron Jaw Harris - "dancing with three tables in his mouth"; Virginia Plummer - "exotic dancer"; Decoy - "now you see him now you don't, back with a brand new bag of tricks." One could view all the above for a mere 75 cents, and if a reservation was required, it could be had by dialing JA-7605.

"You always got a full floor show back in those days," emphasized Naomi "Toots" Swan, Painia's niece who worked behind the bar at the Dew Drop for the better part of 25 years. *"Frank always had an emcee or comedian that would host the show and loosen up the audience. Then you always*

had your shake dancers and female impersonators that came on before the star attraction. The Dew Drop always had a house band; back in the Forties it was either Dave Bartholomew or Edgar Blanchard and the Gondoliers, and they'd do a couple of numbers on the show too."

"I guess you'd say that by today's standards the club wasn't much, it only held maybe 200 to 300 people. It just had plain wooden tables and chairs, but they were covered with clean, white tablecloths, and everyone that worked there had a fresh uniform on."

Virtually every Black entertainer of note passed through the doors of the Dew Drop -- The Sweethearts of Rhythm, Amos Milburn, Lollipop Jones, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Ivory Joe Hunter, Chubby Newsome, The Ravens, and Cecil Gant, to name but a few.

But the Dew Drop also served as a training ground for many New Orleans musicians. "The first time I ever got on stage was on an amateur show at the Dew Drop in 1946," recalls singer / bandleader Tommy Ridgley. "I'll never forget, Edgar Blanchard's Gondoliers were playing and I sang 'Piney Brown Blues' and won first prize. That really encouraged me to stick with music. In later years I saw younger musicians like Earl King, Huey Smith, and even Allen Toussaint get their starts the same way."

Painia also had a keen eye for talent, and many artists credit him with their early success. According to Naomi Swan, Painia was instrumental in getting Larry Darnell's career off the ground, among others. "Frank picked Larry out of a revue called The Brownskin Models around 1949. He gave him a job singing in the front bar. Larry had a boyish look and when he sang he just drove the women wild. He did so well that people were leaving the nightclub to see him in the front bar. Frank had a lot of connections in the business and arranged for Larry to make his first record, 'I'll Get Along Somehow.' That made him a star."

#### **MORE THAN JUST A NIGHTCLUB**

Painia saw yet another way to take advantage of the abundance of local talent, and in April 1949 he opened the Dew Drop Inn Booking Agency. "Sometimes we'd have as many as four bands out on the road on one night," says son Gerald Painia, who helped run the booking end of the business. "Whoever came up with a big record in town, Dad would book. He had a circuit that stretched from Texas to Alabama that included everything from colleges to roadhouses. We booked Earl King, Guitar Slim, Shirley & Lee, Smiley Lewis, Chris Kenner -- really a lot of people. We had some great musicians in the bands too: Lee Allen, Huey Smith, Roland Cook, even Allen Toussaint for a while."

Normally a man of few words, Toussaint loses his traditional reserve when discussing Frank Painia and the Dew Drop: "Oh, I wish you could have seen it in its heyday. If you were a musician, at some point of the day you were going to go to the Dew Drop. Unless you were doing something really important, you were probably getting ready to go to the Dew Drop."

"It was a musician's haven. When bands got ready to go to Houma or Vacherie, they met at the Dew Drop. When they came back around 2 a.m., they'd go inside the club and jam. There were musicians around the Dew Drop 24 hours a day. There was a permanent place outside the Dew Drop where guys hung out, and inside the club and restaurant too."

"Frank was the kind of guy people looked to for answers. He was the kind of guy that walked around with his chest poked out, but it wasn't a put-on. He had strong features and he walked slow with a lot of grace. When he showed up everybody got shook up. He gave the orders and everybody listened. Whoever dropped the glass cleaned it up real quick, and the guy with the mop started mopping real good."

A highly respected man in the Black community (in fact he was dubbed "the mayor of LaSalle Street"), Frank Painia was also a pioneer in the civil rights movement. In a much-publicized incident, Painia, along with screen star Zachary Scott and his party, were arrested in November of 1952 and charged with disturbing the peace and "mixing." Scott, a white actor from the North, was on location in New Orleans for a film and was visiting the club to see "Papa" Lightfoot when the NOPD received a complaint that "Negroes and whites were being served together."

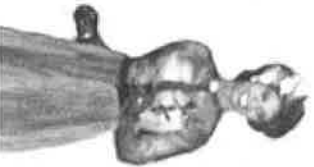
"I remember that night like it was yesterday," says Laura Jackson. "Father decided to make a stand and went to jail with everyone else. Whites had always come into the Dew Drop; in fact a lot of policemen visited the place. The ongoing joke around the place was, if you needed a cop for something, you had to call the Dew Drop. They just wanted to make an example of someone. They threw the charges out the next day, but my father wasn't afraid to go to jail, in fact he went a number of times. But he had a purpose, he continually lobbied in city council to eliminate the segregation laws. In fact he was the first Black to ever book the municipal auditorium."

The Fifties were a great decade for the Dew Drop. While the public's taste in music was to change over the years, Painia adapted, continuing to offer the best entertainment in New Orleans. At one time or another people like Ray Charles, Christine Kittrel, James Brown, Milt Jackson and Little Richard were familiar faces around LaSalle Street. In fact, Little



Richard would immortalize the club when he waxed the appropriately titled "Dew Drop Inn" years later.

Another figure that was associated with the Dew Drop for nearly two decades was Patsy Valdele, a transvestite singer/emcee known as the "Toast of New Orleans" or simply "Toast."



"Oh, Patsy was something else," laughs Naomi Swan. "Patsy was as gay as they came and didn't care who knew. She made herself the queen of the Dew Drop. Patsy was so funny on stage because she always used expressions she knew nothing about. She used to throw her arms out and sing 'Truss in Me'!"

"She didn't want anyone looking better than her, either. When the new female impersonators would come to town she'd want to check them out. Once, one came from Los Angeles and I just couldn't believe she was a man. She was so tiny and so pretty. That night when Patsy called to get our opinion of the new impersonator, and Paul Painia told me to tell Patsy not to bother coming in tonight!"

"Patsy was a great emcee," points out Tommy Ridgley. "She was one of the reasons they'd have those great after-hours jam sessions. Frank would find out which entertainers were in the club and tell Patsy. Then she'd introduce them all and call them up to the bandstand. I remember one night I was on stage with Bobby "Blue" Bland, Little Willie John and maybe fifteen other musicians. It's hard to believe, but sometimes you would get out of the Dew Drop until nine o'clock in the morning."

Patsy also hosted an event which became associated with the Dew Drop, the New Orleans Gay Ball, which was held every Halloween. According to Gerald Painia's wife, Catherine, "the gay ball was one of the biggest events of the year. We always tried to sneak in to see it, even when we were underage. All the gays from the Quarter would attend and you'd see fashions you'd o thought came from Paris. And cut up and act silly -- you wouldn't believe the things we saw."

The early '60s continued to be heady years for the Dew Drop as Painia continued to vary his floor shows to meet his audience's tastes. When soul became the latest trend, the Dew Drop hosted the likes of Sam Cooke, the Ike & Tina Turner Revue, Joe Tex and Otis Redding, the name but a few.

Singer Solomon Burke has nothing but fond memories about the man he befriended in 1961. "A musician had no better friend than Frank Painia," recalls Burke solemnly. "Everyone that was out there at that time knew that if they got in a jam, if they could get to New Orleans, Frank Painia

*would help them out. He would feed you, and put a roof over your head, until you got on your feet. He even had a room in the back that was full of clothes that other people had left at the hotel. If he couldn't use you at the Dew Drop, he'd get on the phone and try and get you some work somewhere."*

## THE DECLINING YEARS

The glory years for the Dew Drop slowly crept to a standstill sometime around the mid-60s. Laura Jackson blames the club's demise on a number of factors. "Ironically, I think integration really hurt the Dew Drop," she points out. "Blacks could go to Bourbon Street then or any of the other places they wanted to go, but couldn't before because of segregation. That was new to them and meant a lot of our customers left."



"Also my father got sick in 1965, and he was continually in and out of the hospital. He had always been at the Dew Drop six or seven days a week. The only time he took a day off was to take the family fishing. When he couldn't be there every day, things started to slip. Being sick he couldn't concentrate on the business." Naomi Swan also added, "I think Frank began to feel he could present any show and people would just show up like they did before. He was the type of man who always wanted things done his way. He didn't take to advice too well even if it was good."

By the late '60s, the Groove Room was closed, and the more profitable hotel portion of the business was expanded in its place. Live music continued in the front bar, or the Dew Drop Cafe as it was called, but the impressive floor shows were no more. The bold weekly ads that once graced the "Louisiana Weekly" had shrunk to a mere column in width, and appeared irregularly. Still, they recalled the better days when they boasted "Blazing Action -- Boss Entertainment." Mostly local acts were featured including Diamond Joe, Lil' Booker (James Carroll Booker), Johnny Adams and, as always, Patsy. Even as late as the summer of 1967, "the boss of the blues," Big Joe Turner, was still a Dew Drop attraction.

"Even though he was still doing well with the bar and hotel, I know it had to hurt him when the nightclub was closed," continues Swan. "That was his baby. He liked nothing better than getting a bottle out when an entertainer came to town and having a few drinks. That was his life. By the time I stopped working there in 1969, they stopped having live entertainment altogether. Frank was really sick and there was nobody to take his place."

Frank Painia eventually succumbed to cancer in July of 1972. He was eulogized on the front page of the "Louisiana Weekly" and rightfully cited as "always at the front of any movement to make Black people push forward." After his death the barbershop, restaurant and bar were leased out to new occupants, while Painia's wife Fennie struggled to make a go of the hotel. By the mid-70s the building had fallen into disrepair and on more than one occasion listed as for sale.

Today the Dew Drop still sits quietly on LaSalle Street, its brick facade covered with aluminum siding, looking forlorn and in need of a facelift.

**Criterion 1: Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community**

New Orleans is an important music and entertainment center due to the number of live music venues that attracted nationally known artists and fostered the city's many musical styles. There were hundreds of music clubs in the city that carried the musical heritage of the city, however most are just a memory and the famous Dew Drop Inn still stands to represent the musical culture of New Orleans.

**2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state, or local history**

By the 1940's, the Dew Drop Inn was considered by many, the most famous African-American nightclub in New Orleans. The club drew both national and local acts and served as an incubator of local talent who become, over time, national celebrities. Entertainers such as Etta James, B.B. King, Little Richard, Dinah Washington, and Big Joe Turner were featured at the Dew Drop Inn along side local acts such as Allan Toussaint, Deacon John, Ernie K. Doe, Earl King, Irma Thomas, Charles Neville and Guitar Slim. Legends such as Duke Ellington, Ray Charles, and Ella Fitzgerald would stop by the Dew Drop Inn, open twenty-four hours, to jam with the band and visit with old friends while in New Orleans.

**Staff Recommendation**

The staff recommends that the Dew Drop Inn be designated as a landmark as it fulfills two of the four criteria required to establish significance. The building is significant as it exemplifies the broad cultural and social history of New Orleans, and is identified with historic personages in national and local history.

Report prepared by:  
Nicole Hernandez

Architectural Historian  
Historic District Landmarks Commission  
1340 Poydras St., Suite 1152  
New Orleans, LA 70112

## **Bibliography**

"The South's Swankiest Night Spot: The Legend of the Dew Drop Inn" by Jeff Hannusch.

Historic photograph # 1 from web site:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/7388762@N03/2346173516/>