

THE GOLDSMITH-SHEEN HOUSE
1122 Jackson Avenue

Architectural Rating: Blue
Date of Construction: 1859-60
Architects: Henry Howard and Albert Diertel

Nomination Information

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

Site Description

Square 146, Lots 24 and part of 23
4th Municipal District, 11th Assessment District
Zoning: RM-1
Lot Size: 56'7"5" front on Jackson Avenue by 159'10"3" in depth, plus
an additional portion measuring 19'7"4½" in depth by 60' wide
across the rear property line.

Owners: Dr. Alan E. Sheen and Mrs. Bernice F. Lurie Sheen

The nomination of this property was based upon the building's architectural significance and its association with famous architects, well-known builders, and significant historical figures. Each of the four criteria used in determining landmark qualification, as outlined in Ordinance No. 5992 M.C.S., will be examined on an individual basis in order to produce information upon which a final decision whether or not to designate this property will be made.

Architectural Significance

Dating the construction of the large frame house at 1122 Jackson Avenue and describing its appearance at that time (which is essentially the same as its present appearance) is not a difficult task, thanks to the discovery of the original building contract, along with very detailed specifications about every aspect of the building, in the New Orleans Notarial Archives. Manuel Goldsmith, a native of Hessedorf, Germany, purchased this property of April 16, 1859 from Susan W. (Mrs. Horatio) Hills. On December 10 of 1859, Goldsmith took out a building contract with Casey and Kahoe, Builders, for " a two-story frame dwelling house with garret and rear buildings on Jackson Avenue between Magazine and Camp Streets, with columns and antae and cast iron fence. \$8500." The architects were Henry Howard and Albert Diertel.

The house was built in a late Greek Revival style, with a three-bay, side-hall, American Townhouse plan. There is a two-story gallery across the front and an attached two-story service wing, also with a gallery, in the rear. There is also a two-story semi-octagonal bay on the left side of the building, and, as a more recent addition, a small enclosed area added to the right side of the second floor. According to the architects' specifications, the galleries were to be "finished according to drawings, with wood columns, antaes" (referring to the box columns on either side of the two central round columns) "pilasters, entablatures, moulded fascias, soffits, and all other proper wood finishings."

The columns and antaas were all to be finished with carved capitals and moulded bases, and they display a motif often found on Howard-designed building: the raised quatrefoil or rosette design. Howard frequently employed this detail around the frames of doorways as well as on capitals, as seen on the nearby houses at 2323 and 2331-33 Magazine Street. The use of this detail precludes the use of any specifically Greek order, but the style is nevertheless Greek Revival, as evidenced by the straightforward house plan, the square-headed windows, the wide cornice at the top, and the classically-inspired door frame.

The frame around the main entrance, located on the right of the facade, is composed of two pilasters with simple moulded capitals supporting a wide entablature with a projecting cornice. The door is recessed beyond "jamb suitables for folding 1 3/4" blinds." It has a transom above it and is in the French style, with single tall panes of glass in each half. The same cornice, used on a smaller scale, can be found above the two full-length windows on the first level, and the three identical windows above them. The windows have six-over-nine double-hung sash with louvered shutters. Howard stated "they shall be finished in the best Paris green."

The detailing of the large cornice, which is an element very important to the overall appearance of the house, is the one key to the gradually shifting tastes of the time. Instead of traditional classical mouldings, such as dentil courses, Howard here used decorative brackets, which are paired at the corners and above the columns. Also in evidence is the box-shaped projection at the center of the parapet that became such a popular element in the Italianate designs of the next two decades.

Another decorative element here of particularly fine quality is the cast iron, found in the second floor gallery railing and across the front property line. According to the architects' specification: "The front galleries are to have ornamental cast iron railings worth \$2.00 per linear foot and finished with moulded cypress handrails. The rear galleries are to have strong wood rails and 1 1/4 by 1 1/4 inch square wood balusters."

The basic building data was carefully spelled out for Casey and Kahoe: "The foundation walls and pillars shall be of the best quality hard and well-burnt Lake Made Bricks. The chimneys are to be of best quality Country Made Bricks." Part of the first story was done in the brick-between-posts method for stability. The mortar was "fresh Thomaston lime and coarse sharp gritted sand properly mixed and manipulated." The siding was also precisely prescribed: "The outside of the main building on the front galleries shall be sided up with the very best quality of well seasoned mill-dressed Yellow Pine boards not over 3 1/2 inches wide and 1 1/2 inches thick with tongued and grooved edges put together with white lead and secretly nailed." The other portions of the building used the same wood "put on not to show more than five inches to the weather; the boards shall have at least one inch lap or cover."

Although building interiors are not under the jurisdiction of the New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission, some facts about these are worth mentioning. The parlor, dining room and three main bedrooms were to have marble mantels, worth (in 1859), \$125, \$75, and \$50, respectively. Mr. Goldsmith was to be "allocated the privilege of selecting the mantels and grates." The wooden mantels for the servants' rooms, ironing room and kitchen valued at \$10 each,

were painted black and varnished. Plaster cornice moldings and ceiling center-pieces were ordered for the parlor, dining room and hall, and the doors in these rooms were grained oak. In addition, the parlor was to have an elaborate elliptical archway in the middle, with carved moldings and finished wood paneling, set on "ndsome and appropriate carved trusses according to detail drawing furnished by the architect."

These descriptions from the time of the building's construction give an indication that it was planned as an elegant home right from its inception. At some point that elegance was heightened by extensive interior paintwork. According to the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, it maintains more fresco wall decorations and stencilling than probably any other mid-nineteenth century residence in the south. This fact should lend some weight to its consideration as a landmark.

As befitting an elegant Garden District home, the Goldsmith-Sheen house has an elegant garden. In 1931 it was described in the March 22 Rotogravure Supplement of the Times-Picayune as:

"a veritable Garden of Eden, filled with beautiful and unusual plants, many of which are native to Louisiana. Here and there bubble lovely fountains whos pools reflect the flowered beauty. A large fountain is patterned from one in the palace of Generalife, which stands behind the famous Alhambra in Granada, Spain, and adds a lovely note of color with its bright tiles. Another touch of brilliant color is found in the large collection of brightly feathered birds that fits perfectly is so lovely a garden".

The construction of this house was completed by September 28, 1860, the date of the release of a building lien held by Casey and Kahoe against M. Goldsmith, since the building contract had been satisfied in full and \$8500 paid to them by him. On that same day Goldsmith sold the property to Henry Thornhill for \$16,500. In 1865 Thornhill sold the property to Edward Murphy for \$18,000, and then in 1870 Murphy sold it for \$15,000 to Henry Abraham, head of the cotton house H. Abraham and Son of New Orleans and New York. Abraham lived in this house for twenty years, at the end of which time a note in the property tax assessment records for 1890 lists: \$1000 of live animals (horses, cows, goats, etc.), \$500 of cars, carriages and vehicles of all kinds, \$3000 of household goods, and \$500 of jewelry or silverware.

On May 1, 1890, the property was sold to Mr. Leon Godchaux, founder of Godchaux's, who also bought parts of the lots then called 11 and 12 to add to the rear of lots 24 and part of 23, for a total of \$11,250. The Godchaux family owned the property until 1901, when the heirs of Leon Godchaux sold it to Seymour Gonzales for \$7500. The City Directories indicate, however, that during those years from 1890 to 1901, Godchaux lived at 1240 Esplanade, not at this house. None of his ten children were listed at this address either. Subsequent owners include Mrs. Florence Barrow Fischer, who bought it for \$11,000 in 1906; Dr. David Barrow who bought it for \$8700 in 1914; David Fisher who paid \$7000 for it in 1920; and Alcidore Terrebone, who bought it in 1937 for \$5100 and then apparently mortgaged it five times, at \$6100, \$6300, \$6800, \$7500, and \$10,000, before Oak Homestead Association bought it from him for \$13,500 on June 28, 1950. The property was then purchased by other

members of the Terrebonne family, remaining in that family's possession until 1970 when Andrew Goodyear bought it for \$21,600. Five years later Dryades Savings and Loan Association paid Goodyear \$55,000 for the property. The present owners, Mrs. Bervice F. Turie Sheen and Dr. Alan Sheen, then purchased it from the Savings and Loan for \$44,000 on June 26, 1975.

In 1982 Dr. and Mrs. Alan Sheen entered into a covenant with the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, in which the Sheens received a matching grant for the purpose of restoration work in the amount of \$15,000, under the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Today the house is in excellent condition and is beautifully maintained. It is certainly of major importance in its own right, as the design of a famous architectural firm, the work of well-known nineteenth builders, the location of significant interior fresco work and stencilling, and the home of numerous leading figures in New Orleans history. It is also an important member of the collection of significant buildings along Jackson Avenue, and in fact serves as somewhat of an anchor for the group, which extends from Magazine Street to Brainard Street.

Architects and Builders

Henry Howard and Albert Diettel were partners from 1857-1860. Howard was a native of Cork, Ireland and came to New Orleans around 1839; Diettel was from Germany. Howard studied with James Dakin in 1845, then set up an independent practice in 1846. Both on his own and in conjunction with Diettel, Howard was responsible for many fine buildings, including Belle Grove, Madewood, and Nottoway Plantations, and numerous churches and residences in New Orleans, including the house at 1236 Jackson Avenue. He was one of the most prolific architects of the nineteenth century. Diettel is remembered particularly as the architect of St. John the Baptist Church and perhaps of St. Mary's Assumption Church as well.

Casey and Kahoe are among the best-known of the nineteenth-century builders.

Historic Personages

Both Henry Abraham and Leon Godchaux can be considered leading figures in New Orleans history. Abraham was the head of his own cotton house, H. Abraham and Son, of New Orleans and New York, for over fifty years. His company also had strong ties with London. Abraham lived at 1122 Jackson Avenue for twenty years. Godchaux, although it seems he never resided in this house, owned it for eleven years. He was a native of Herbeville, France, and came to New Orleans at the age of twenty-one. From his beginnings as a French Market shop owner, he grew to be "perhaps the richest man in the state," according to his obituary in the Daily Picayune, May 19, 1899. He was the founder of Godchaux's Clothing Co., as well as the head of numerous other commercial ventures.

Social, Cultural, Economic and Political History

None

Staff Recommendation

For designation, based on architectural significance and the association with famous architects, well-known builders, and important figures in New Orleans history.