

**LAFON HOME/ODYSSEY HOUSE  
1125 N. TONTI STREET**

Landmark Designation Report

June 9, 1998

Architectural Rating: Blue  
Construction Date: 1866 and early 1890s  
Architect: Unknown; Contractor - Paul Bauhin

Site Description

Square 233, Lots 6, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42 - lot size: 153' 3" front on Gov. Nicholas Street  
120' 0" depth on N. Tonti

2nd Municipal District, 8th Assessment District

Zoning: RD-3, Two Family Residential

Owner: Odyssey House Louisiana

Nomination Information

Date Nominated: March 12, 1991  
Nominated by: Camille Strachan  
Seconded by: Dr. John Ernst, Mr. Ernest Jones

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural significance and its association with a historic personage. Each of the four areas of criteria used in determining whether a property is worthy of or meets the qualifications for landmark status, as outlined in City Ordinance #5992 M.C.S., will be examined.

History of the Property

Thomy Lafon, a wealthy black businessman, bought two large lots of land bounded by N. Tonti, Hospital (now Gov. Nichols), N. Rocheblave and Ursuline in the Treme area from Bazile Brosset Beauregard in 1836. In 1845 he sold the property to Auguste LeBlanc for \$300.00, but he repurchased it, still undeveloped, in 1850 for \$500.00. In the mid 1860s Mr. Lafon had the large brick building built as an asylum for war orphans. He donated the property to *L'Association pour l'Assistance des Orphelins de couleur de la Louisiane*, an organization chartered in 1865. In 1877 the home was handed over to the Society of the Holy Family. When Mr. Lafon died in 1893 he bequeathed a large sum of money to be used by the nuns for the care of aged, indigent black women. The Robinson Atlas of 1880, which reflects information from the 1870s, shows the existence of the large brick building. The Sanborn Maps from 1896 show the complex as it exists today with the smaller two-story, frame building and outbuilding. In 1974 the Sisters of the Holy Family moved the Lafon Home to a new complex on Chef Menteur Highway and in 1976 the Sisters sold the original buildings to the Odyssey Institute, a nonprofit corporation from New Jersey that offers care for substance-abusers.

## Architectural Significance

The original building is a three and a half story masonry structure with wrought iron galleries on three sides. Although the galleries are in poor condition, they are extant and for the most part retain their decorative cast iron railings and posts. The building is nine bays wide by five bays deep. The main entry door, which faces Tonti Street, is accessed by a set of concrete steps and is framed with a large Greek Revival surround. The structural brick arch of the doorway is visible above this surround. The double door is recessed and topped by a large rectangular transom. Directly above the doorway, on the second and third floors, are a pair of 2/2 double hung windows. All other windows are 6/6 double hung, and all doors appear to have rectangular transoms. All the openings in the building appear to have segmentally arched openings with brick sills and arched brick headers. On the front facade, a row of brick banding separates the first floor from the second and a wooden cornice runs across the top of the wall. The roof is low and hipped, with eight gabled dormers - three each along the front and back and one at each end. There are four interior chimneys. On the rear facade, there are two corner enclosures, so the galleries do not wrap all the way around. These enclosures match the rest of the building, except that the rear corners are chamfered and the windows are four light pivoting units.

There is an 1890s frame building to the immediate rear of the masonry building, and it is connected to the original building by a walkway. The Queen Anne frame building is L-shaped and two-storied, with a front gable roof. The odd shape of the building makes it appear as if it could possibly have been built in two separate pieces, or as one building with a later addition. The main section, which is referred to as "convent" on the 1896 Sanborn Map, is three bays wide and five bays deep with a rear addition. Windows are 6/6. The front facade has drop siding and quoins, and the second floor windows have molded crowns. The gable is decorated with fish scale shingles, an arched window (now gone), and molded cornice with ornamented vergeboard. The position of the quoins shows that an alteration has occurred to the corner of the building where a recessed entrance now is.

The second part of this building is recessed behind a fence. The ornamentation of the front gable matches that of the larger section of the building. It also has drop siding and quoins, and is only two bays wide. The second floor windows, which are all that are visible, are matching units of three windows. The center window is segmentally arched, 1/1, with Queen Anne-style stained glass. On each side of this is a much narrower, round arched, Queen Anne stained glass window.

The buildings have suffered some alterations, such as the introduction of exterior fire stairs on the galleries, a rear frame enclosure on the main building, replacement of the dormer windows with aluminum, and a handicapped ramp on the front of the frame building. The galleries are in a severe state of disrepair, but the rest of the buildings appear to be in good shape.

## Architect

Unknown.

Contractor - Paul Baudin

## Historic Personages

Thomy Lafon was a wealthy black philanthropist. He was important to Faubourg Tremé as a resident, realtor and broker. Lafon was born on December 28, 1810, in New Orleans. He started his career teaching and later opened a small dry goods store. By 1850 the census lists Lafon as a broker with an estate of \$10,000.00. His fortune was made primarily from real estate acquisitions, the lending of money at high interest rates and interest accrued from his savings. Friends described him as thrifty and frugal which accounted for his accumulation of property. He shared a modest house at the corner of N. Robertson and Ursuline with his mother and widowed sister.

Mr. Lafon was active in the politics of his day. He was a member of the *Comité des Citoyens*, the group which instigated the *Plessy vs Ferguson* lawsuit that resulted in the establishment of the "separate but equal" doctrine. He was a contributor to the major charitable institutions of his time. He was responsible for the purchase of the property that was the Orleans Theatre, at Bourbon and Orleans, where he erected the St. John Berchman's Girl's Asylum. He also negotiated with the city of Baltimore for the purchase of the Orleans Ballroom which in 1882 became the Mother House for the Sisters of the Holy Family and St. Mary's Academy. (John McDonogh formerly owned the Ballroom and included it in his will to the city of Baltimore.) 1125 N. Tonti Street was originally donated by Lafon to *L'Association pour l'Assistance des Orphelins de couleur de la Louisiane*. In 1877 the structure was given to the Sisters of the Holy Family who renamed it the Lafon Home.

Mr. Lafon died on December 22, 1893, at the age of 82 years. His estate was valued at \$413,000.00 in securities and real estate, most of which was donated to charitable institutions or put into trust. In recognition of his charity, the City of New Orleans named a school for him and he was the first black to be honored with a bust in the state capitol.

## Social, Economic and Political History

In November, 1842, three young women of the *gens de couleur libres*, Henriette Delille, Josephine Charles and Juliette Gaudin, came together to form the Society of the Holy Family. These three women broke with the conventions of their time to devote themselves to the worship of God and the needs of the poor. In 1847 the Legislature of Louisiana passed an act to incorporate literary, scientific and religious associations whose membership exceeded six persons. Those organizations without six members could not be recognized. To help the sisters a group of free men and women of color allied themselves with the nuns and formed the Association of the Holy Family. This organization gave the Sisters the moral and financial support they needed. Early in 1852 Henriette and Juliette were sent to St. Michael's Convent in St. James Parish for religious instruction. When they returned later that year, the Sisters were allowed to take their final vows as the Sisters of the Holy Family. Previously two other groups

had attempted to start religious orders for the colored people of New Orleans. These earlier attempts failed but the Sisters of the Holy Family persisted and thrived. The young women taught, aided and assisted the poor persons of color and slaves of New Orleans.

Through the generosity of contributors, whose names make up a who's who list of Treme residents, the Sisters staffed schools, orphanages and homes for the aged. In 1867 they opened St. Mary's Academy, the oldest private, black school in the south. By the turn of the century the Sisters had spread to Central America where they maintained schools in Belize. Today they staff schools in several cities in Louisiana, Texas and California.

The Sisters remained in the Treme area for over a hundred years until 1955 when they dedicated a new complex on Chef Menteur Highway in New Orleans East. In 1974 the Sisters built a new Lafon Home across the Highway from the Mother House thereby ending their association with Faubourg Treme. Interestingly, the president of the Sisters of the Holy Family at the time of the sale (1976) of the Tonti Street building was Mother Rose de Lima Hazeur, S.S.F. The Hazeur family had appeared as free people of color in Treme in 1798 before the establishment of the suburb, when Rose Hazeur (Mme. Prosper) purchased land from Claude Treme.

The Sisters of the Holy Family began its care for the elderly in 1842 when Henriette Delille, Josephine Charles and Juliette Gaudin came together to found the order. They moved into a house on St. Bernard with a handful of elderly women that they cared for. A few months later an old man was sent to the Sisters for care. Because they did not want to turn him away the Sisters gave up their own small apartment in the rear of the house and moved to a house on Hospital Street (now Gov. Nichols.) At a time when health care was sporadic at best for all but the wealthy, the poor of color had little or no options available to them. The Sisters provided care for the sick and elderly people of color who had no where else to turn.

When the building at 1125 N. Tonti Street was turned over to them the Sisters housed orphans and the elderly there. As their resources grew they were able to build new structures and eventually the orphans were moved to new homes. The Lafon Home was left entirely for the care of the aged. When the Sisters built the new home in New Orleans East, the building was sold to the Odyssey House which offers residential treatment and care for substance abusers. 1125 N. Tonti street thus continues its history of community service.

### Staff Recommendation

This building is probably the most imposing structure in Treme. The two story balconies that wrap around three sides of the building add to its uniqueness. The Sisters of the Holy Family are the oldest, black religious order in the south, the second oldest in the country and continue to serve this city and many others. Sr. Henriette Delille, the founder of the order, has been declared "worthy of honor" by the Vatican, which is the first step towards canonization. Its association with Thomy Lafon further adds to its importance. The staff recommends designation due to the architectural importance of the building, its association with historic figure Thomy Lafon and the social significance of the work done by the Sisters of the Holy Family and the Lafon Home itself.

### Endnotes

Sr. Eve Regina, S.S.F., Archivist - Sisters of the Holy Family, Personal Interview, May 5, 1998.

Christovich, Mary Louise and Roulhac Toledano. New Orleans Architecture Volume VI  
Faubourg Treme and the Bayou Road. Gretna: Pelican Press, 1980.

Lafon Nursing Home of The Holy Family (private publication for dedication ceremony, 1973)

Hart, Sr. Mary Francis Borgia, S.S.F., Violets in the King's Garden - A History of the Sisters of  
The Holy Family. Unpublished thesis, 1976.

Detiege, Sr. Audrey Marie S.S.F., Henriette Delille, Free Woman of Color. (private publication,  
1976)