

THE ELLERMANN-GORE HOUSE  
1234 Henry Clay Avenue

Architectural Rating: Blue  
Construction Date: 1895  
Architect: Thomas Sully

Nomination Information

Date: February 9, 1988  
Nominated by: Ernest Jones  
Seconded by: Bruce Oreck, Jane Brooks  
Recommended by: Staff

Site Description

Square 46, Lots 1,2,3 & part of 4  
6th Municipal District, 15th Assessment District  
Zoning: RD-2  
Lot Size: 132' 8"  $2\frac{1}{2}$ "' X 96' 10"  $3\frac{1}{2}$ "'

Owner: Dr. & Mrs. Samuel D. Gore, Jr.

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural significance and its association with the career of a prominent architect. 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 will be made whether or not to designate the property will be made.

Architectural Significance

The land on which this building stands was acquired by Susie M.W. Ellermann in two purchases, the first on June 22, 1894, and the second on October 11, 1894. At the time the property was assessed in early 1895, it was valued at \$1,000, with the assessed value rising to \$5,000, indicating a major improvement to the site. In the September 1, 1895 issue of The Daily Picayune, which contained an annual article on the work of local architects in the preceding year, Thomas Sully & Co. reported designing a "Old Colonial cottage at Henry Clay and Prytania for Mr. Ellermann", at a cost of \$4,800. The reference to a Mr. Ellermann must mean Frank Ellermann, who was listed as residing in the house in the house in the 1896 city directory, and who is presumed to be Susie Ellermann's father. It is impossible to determine whether or not he actually paid for the house, and his name does not appear in any of the ownership documents for the property. One could speculate that he gave the house to Susie Ellermann, but there is no documentation to support such a claim.

The house which Thomas Sully designed for Susie Ellermann can be said to represent the culmination of the development of the raised villa house type in New Orleans in the 19th century. As one would expect of a house of the 1890s, the design is quite asymmetrical and ornamental. The main elevation, facing Henry Clay, presents an I shaped house mass, with a front porch extending out from the projecting bay, towards Prytania Street, terminating in a rounded bay which returns the porch colonnade to the side wall of the house. The porch is framed by a series of paired Ionic columns, which are connected by a wood railing and balustrade. The profile of the wooden handrailing actually wraps around the columns, rather than simply stopping at the point where it makes contact with the column.

Access to the porch from the interior of the house is provided by three full length window openings which are fitted with one-over-one sash. The front doorway is set at the south end of the porch, within a simple frame with sidelights and transoms. To the left of the doorway, the mass of the house projects towards Henry Clay. This projecting bay is fitted with a rather unusual bay window on the first floor, which while technically having three sides, does not project from the wall plane. This was accomplished by having the window set back slightly within the wall framing. The face of the gable which tops this bay is clad in wood shingles, which contrasts with the weatherboard finish of the first floor walls. Another three sided bay window appears here, this one projecting out from the wall surface, supported by two small brackets. The gable face above this window is pulled forward so as to rest atop the window. The front slope of the roof of the house is broken by two dormers, which are unique in that their sides and fronts are clad in slate. These dormers are capped with pyramidal roofs sheathed in slate, with a copper cap over the peak of the pyramid.

The side elevation of the house which faces Prytania Street is more visible to the passerby than that facing Magazine Street, but both share similar features in terms of their detailing. The fenestration of the Prytania side of the house is quite irregular, with a side doorway set alongside a projecting three sided bay window. Above this bay window are three panes of stained glass, and to the right of the bay window are a trio of one-over-one windows forming another projecting bay. The upper half story of the house, formed by the gable ends of the main roof, is faced with wood shingles, which are laid with a sawtooth edge along the bottom edge of the upper story, which actually overhangs the first floor slightly. In the center of both of the gable faces is a Palladian window opening, designed so that the arched central section is highlighted by a series of courses of shingles laid in a slightly recessed arch above the central window. The side door on the Prytania Street elevation appears to be original, as it is aligned with a gate in the cast-iron fence which runs across the Henry Clay and Prytania fronts of the lot. To the rear of the house, fronting on Prytania, is a non-historic shed roofed garage structure.

When The Daily Picayune noted the design of an "Old Colonial cottage" at this location by Thomas Sully & Co., they were, in all probability, quoting the architect himself. At first glance, it is perhaps not easy to understand why this house would have been considered as "Colonial". By the 1890s, it had become commonplace, with respect to residential designs, to use the stylistic label Colonial or Colonial Revival, even when the designs were not clearly recognizable as copies of any known work from the 18th century. The use of classical elements, such as the columns and Palladian windows of this house, would have been sufficient to evoke some recollection of America's colonial past. It is significant to note that at the same time that the Ellermann house was designed, Sully was also designing the residence of J.W. Castles at 6000 St. Charles Avenue, which is almost a copy of one of the most famous of all 18th century American houses, the Vassall House in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which had gained fame as the residence of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Both were labeled as Colonial, although only one clearly resembled a Colonial original.

Architect

Thomas Sully, the architect of the Ellermann house, was, without question, the most important architect in New Orleans in the last quarter of the 19th century. Born in Mississippi City, Mississippi in 1855, Sully had no academic training in architecture, as was common at that time. He worked briefly in Austin, Texas and New York City for architects there before he arrived in New Orleans early in 1883. He formed a partnership with Albert Toledano in 1887, which lasted until 1893, after which Sully continued to practice as the head of his own firm. Sully's practice continued until 1906, when he essentially retired. He died in 1939 in New Orleans.

The majority of Sully's extant designs are residential, with many other house designs having been demolished in recent years. Among the more prominent houses by him are his own residences at 4010 St. Charles Avenue and 1305 South Carrollton Avenue, the John Wallis house at 4114 St. Charles Avenue, the John Morris house at 2525 St. Charles Avenue, and the John W. Castles house at 6000 St. Charles Avenue. Sully's commercial works have fared poorly, with many having been demolished. The most important surviving commercial buildings by him are the original Whitney National Bank at 619 Gravier Street, and the Hennen Building at 201-211 Carondelet Street. His largest and best known commercial building in New Orleans was the third St. Charles Hotel, which was demolished in 1974.

Historic Personages

Research has been able to shed little light on the life of Susie M.W. Ellermann, the builder and first occupant of this house. She was never listed in the city directories, although we know from tax records that she did own and reside in the house from 1895 until 1900.

Social, Economic and Political History

None