THE SWEET-MORRIS HOUSE
1236 Jackson Avenue

Architectural Rating: Blue
Date of Construction: 1874
Architect: Henry Howard

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

Site Description
Square 170, Lots 1,2, and 3
4th Municipal District; 11th Assessment District
Zoning: RM-1
Lot Size: 96' front on Jackson by 154'3" 7"' on Chestnut, between equal and parallel lines.

Owner: Michael W. Morris

The nomination of this property was based upon the building's architectural significance and its association with a famous 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 whether or not to designate this property will be made.

Architectural Significance

The house at 1236 Jackson Avenue was built by Henry Howard, architect, for George O. Sweet in 1874. Sweet, originally from New England, was a cotton factor and commercial merchant with the firm of M.D. Cooper and Co. at the time that he purchased the property on October 21, 1852 from Thomas W. Reed for $7800. Apparently a building existed on that lot already, because the transaction indicated that the purchase price was for "a certain lot of ground with all the inprovements thereon, situated in suburb Lafayette, bounded by Jackson, Philip, Poplar (now Camp), and Chestnut, forming the corner of Jackson and Chestnut". Also, Sweet is listed in the City Directory as moving from his former residence at 221 Camp to the corner of Jackson and Chestnut soon after the purchase, in 1853. That address is given as his residence every year thereafter, until his death in 1880.

Sweet changed jobs twice, in 1867 being listed as Secretary of the Commercial Insurance Company, and in 1870 forming a commercial merchant firm with partner Thomas Appleton. Their offices were at 122 Gravier. He was quite successful financially it seems, because in 1874 he decided to build this elegant larger home for himself on this same spot, where he had been living for twenty-one years. The property tax assessment records for 1874 show the land valued at $14,000 (whereas it was valued at $8,000 in 1865), and a note states "Large two-story house not finished." The same note appears the next year, but in 1876 it was gone and the assessed value rose to $16,000, indicating a completed new house there.

In 1881 Sweet's widow sold the property and the house to Chapman H. Hyams for $18,000. It stayed in the Hyams family's possession until 1920, when it was owned briefly by Jacob Stern and then was purchased by Dr. Joseph George Dempsey for $17,500. Dempsey's family owned in until January 30, 1958, when his heirs sold it for $65,000 to Mr. and Mrs. Louis C. LeCorgne. The LeCorgnes sold it on April 14, 1969 to George P. Crounse, Jr. for $75,000, and then two years later, on August 13, 1971, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Klein bought the house and property for $65,000 from Guaranty Savings and Homestead Association, on the same day that that institution had paid Crounse $92,000 for it. In 1980 Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Usry paid $172,900 for it, but it was seized from them by Paul Valteau, sheriff, on December 29, 1983, and turned over to the Alliance Federal Savings and Loan for $250,000. The present owner, Michael W. Morris, paid that Savings and Loan $288,000 for it on May 15, 1984.

This house is built in the Italianate style, which Henry Howard favored in many of his later designs. Its plan is asymmetrical and complex, with a large semi-octagonal bay on the left side, a smaller one on the right side, and a projecting rear wing. The facade is three bays wide, but appears even wider because of the position of a two-bay side wing, which sits only slightly back from it to the right. The whole thing is covered with a low-pitched, slate, hipped roof and has weatherboard siding.

Almost all of the openings are square-headed with simple frames and narrow projecting cornices above them. All of the windows in the front part of the house are full-length, and have double-hung one-over-one light sash. The windows are closely and regularly spaced, providing a rythmic design element when viewed form the exterior, and allowing tremendous amounts of light in to the interior. There is a real sense of openness about the house because of this. With the windows raised, permitting the maximum circulation of air and access to the wide galleries, this house would demonstrate well the built-in climate control customary and in fact necessary in New Orleans homes.

Besides the windows, the other main design feature of this building is the vast gallery that practically surrounds it. There the typical Italianate segmental arch motif shows up, if somewhat modified. It is formed by the slightly arched wooden panels that are inserted between the chamfered wooden box columns, that sit on simple, short newel posts. The panels are above the column capitals and are separated by tall carved brackets. Under the second floor overhang are small modillions. There is no balustrade on the first level, and the floor has a decorative inlaid marble design, with carved marble stairs leading up to the front door. The gallery runs in front of the side wing, across the main facade, turns the corner along the left side, and then wraps around the large bay to terminate in the rear.

The second level has a porch above the lower gallery. The difference in terms results from the fact that there are no columns on the second level, nor is there any sort of protective covering or much overhang from the roof. The porch does have a balustrade composed of turned balusters between square posts, the posts being located directly above the columns, and having wooden balls on top of them. The porch is even wider than the gallery, not because it projects out any farther, but because the second level of the left-side bay is smaller than the first and therefore leaves more open floor space on the exterior.

The building's cornice is wide, with small attic-level ventilators in it. The low-pitched roof overhangs slightly beyond the walls of the structure, and is supported by fine decorative brackets in the best Italianate tradition, deeply carved with an interesting double-scroll embellishment. Between the brackets are larger versions of the modillions found on the first level.

Other interesting elements in this harmonious building include the doorway, which is located in the right bay of the three-bay main section of the facade. It is deeply recessed behind a simple frame and features a paneled wooden door with a segmentally arched transom above it. Also, on the facade of the slightly recessed side wing, there is an ornamental double window on the second floor. The two windows themselves are segmentally arched, with the framing above them made more unusual by the addition of a seashell-shaped panel in the center and a semicircular molding around it. On the right side of the house, the small semi-octagonal bay has three decorative round-headed windows on the first floor with stained glass in them. Stained glass was previously found, too, in a large arched window on the stair landing, visible from the rear of the building, but part of it has been lost, and the window has now been replaced with plain glass.

At some point in this building's history there was a fire, according to Mr. Morris. He says some of the wood in the attic is still charred, but no evidence has been found as to the date of the fire or how extensive it might have been. Also to be seen in the attic is the original cistern, says the owner.

A rear wing was added to the back of the house in the past, but it has been completely removed with no traces still remaining. The detached kitchen building/service wing of this house does still exist, however, and is renovated as a two-story brick home at 2226 Chestnut Street, directly behind the Sweet-Morris house.

A substantial yard surrounds this house, enclosed by a wrought-iron fence across the front, a wooden fence between the neighboring property on Jackson Avenue, and a stuccoed brick wall along the Chestnut Street side and back property line. A path of decorative stone leads from the front gate to the marble steps, and a plainer path circles the building. A curving driveway has been made along Chestnut Street, with the masonry wall arching inward slightly to accomodate it. At the side gate near the house an elaborate round wooden covering has been constructed that features the same carved brackets found above the columns on the first level gallery. A complex piece of decorative glass connects the covering to the gallery roof.

The present owner has recently done an extensive amount of landscaping in the yard, as well as a thorough restoration of the house itself, bringing this important example of a large-scale Garden District home and grounds back to wonderful condition and making it one of the architectural treasures of this city.

Architect

Henry Howard was one of the most prolific architects in New Orleans during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Among his works were the Greek Revival building at 1122 Jackson Avenue and at least four others in the Lower Garden District area; at least four major residences along Esplanade (1338-40, 1707, 1914 and 2438 Esplanade); many buildings in the Central Business District as well as churches throughout the city; and Belle Grove

plantation, Woodlawn and Madewood plantations. Howard was born in Cork, Ireland, and came to New Orleans around 1839. He learned the basics of the building trade as a carpenter for a few years, then in 1845 he became a student of the famous architect James Dakin. He went out on his own in 1846 and built up a very successful practice, becoming one of the leading architects in this city. In 1857 he formed a partnership with Albert Diettel that lasted three years. Despite the fact that both in conjunction with Diettel and on his own Howard designed many fine buildings, after his death in 1884 he fell into relative obscurity, with the credit for many of his works going to one or both of the James Galliers. In 1952, thanks to research done mainly by Samuel Wilson, Jr., a retrospective of his work was organized by the Louisiana Landmarks Society and the Newcomb Art School that finally set the record straight and reestablished Howard in his rightful position as one of the most important figures in New Orleans' architectural history. More buildings survive by him than by any other architect of his era.

Social, Cultural, Economic and Political History

None

Historic Personages

None

Staff Recommendation

For designation, based on architectural significance and the fact that this building was designed by Henry Howard, one of New Orleans' most prolific and best late-nineteenth century architects. The staff recommends that only the house and the ground on which it sits be designated, and that the yard surrounding the house not be included in the designation.