

THE OWEN-LASSUS HOUSE
1237 State Street

Architectural Rating: Blue
Construction Date: 1902
Architect: Allison Owen; Diboll & Owen, Architects

Nomination Information

Date: February 9, 1988
Nominated by: Bruce Oreck
Seconded by: John Ernst, Michele Braden
Recommended by: Staff

Site Description

Square 24-46, Lots 12 & 13
6th Municipal District, 15th Assessment District
Zoning: RD-2
Lot Size: 60" X 120"

Owner: Mr. & Mrs. Roy E. Lassus, 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 whether or not to designate the property will be made.

Architectural Significance

The land upon which this building stands was acquired by Allison Owen on June 20, 1902. Property tax assessment records for this square indicate that the two lots were valued at \$1,300 in 1902, and \$4,000 in 1903, indicating a substantial improvement to the property by Owen. Significantly, in Owen's obituary in the January 31, 1951 issue of The Times Picayune, it was noted that "Since 1902 the Owen family residence has been at 1237 State St., planned by Allison Owen." City directory listings confirm this statement, with Owen first being listed there in the 1903 directory, continuing to reside there until his death.

Given the fact that Allison Owen was a principal in one of the most prominent architectural firms in New Orleans at the turn of the century; Diboll & Owen, it is not surprising that he chose to design his own residence. In designing his own house, Owen followed the predominant taste of the time in domestic architecture, namely the desire to emulate the architectural forms of the American colonies from the 18th and early 19th centuries. The most likely source for the design of the Owen residence are the numerous portico fronted houses of Natchez, Mississippi. There, houses by the architect/builder Levi Weeks, such as Auburn, had already become the object of study by architects, with illustrations of several of these houses appearing in contemporary architectural journals and monographs. As a native New Orleanian, it is likely that Owen had visited Natchez by the time he embarked on his career as an architect, so he would have obtained first-hand knowledge of this formal house type prior to designing a new example for his own use.

While Owen had selected a Natchez house form as the model for his own residence, if should be noted that he did not attempt to create an exact copy of any particular Natchez example. To begin with, all of the Natchez portico fronted houses are of brick, whereas the Owen house is of frame construction. Secondly, the fluted Ionic order which Owen used to create his portico was not popular in Natchez, where most houses featured unfluted Tuscan columns.

The Owen house's main elevation faces State Street. This is a five bay composition, with the central bay containing the main entrance being the largest of the five. The central bay is also accented by the large columnar portico which is surmounted by a triangular pediment. The face of the pediment is embellished with a carefully detailed elliptical lunette window, of the sort found in the pediment at Rosalie in Natchez. The front doorway is set within a tripartite frame, with the door flanked by sidelights which contain a series of elliptical muntins. There is no transom above, rather a large broken pediment, with a stylized pineapple, an 18th century symbol of hospitality, placed between the two curvilinear arms of the pediment. The plane of the wall of the central bay is slightly recessed inwards from the wall surfaces of the rest of facade.

The fenestration of the facade is symmetrically composed, with two full length window openings, each fitted with multi-light french doors, set to each side of the entrance bay. These full length openings are fitted with ornate cast-iron openwork panels across the base of the openings. The second floor windows are twelve-over-twelve light sash. A single six-over-six window is placed directly above the front door. The side gabled roof of the house is left plain, with the exception of two simple chimney stacks. The Prytania Street side elevation is unadorned, and the rear elevation of the house is also relatively simple, with the exception of a large and rather striking window which serves to illuminate the interior staircase.

Architect & Historic Personages

Allison Owen, the architect of this house, was one of the principals in the architectural firm of Diboll & Owen. This firm headed by Collins Cerre Diboll and Allison Owen, was established in 1895, and continues to operate today through the successor firm of Kessels, Diboll, Kessels. Owen, born in New Orleans in 1869, was educated at Tulane University, and the School of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The firm of Diboll & Owen was responsible for a large number of significant buildings in New Orleans in the first forty years of this century. Among their more important designs are the Notre Dame Seminary complex, the Criminal Courts Building, the New Orleans Athletic Club, and the former main branch of the New Orleans Public Library, located at Lee Circle and demolished in the late 1950s. The firm was also prominent in the design of local catholic churches, including St. Henry's on General Pershing, and Our Lady of Lourdes on Napoleon. In addition to his professional career Owen was noted for his civic accomplishments, including the organization of the New Orleans Parkway Commission, of which he was serving as president at the time of his death in 1951. Owen was awarded the Times Picayune's Loving Cup in 1929 in recognition of his civic activities.

In addition to his prominence in local architectural circles, Allison Owen enjoyed a military career of note. He commanded the Washington Artillery during that group's participation in the efforts to subdue Pancho Villa along the U.S.-Mexican border in 1916, and was later to command the 141st Field Artillery in World War I. By the end of his active service, Owen had attained the rank of Major General in the United States Army.

Social, Economic and Political History

None