

Central Business District Historic District Landmarks Commission  
Nomination Report



Meeting Date: December 12, 2018

Property Address: 135 – 141 Chartres St.

Owner: Big Easy Properties LLC,  
P O Box 52528  
New Orleans, La 70152

Architect: Unknown

Construction Date: 1821-1845

Significance: Associated with an Important Event in History



Figure 1. Plan de la Ville de la Nouvelle-Orléans avec les noms des propriétaires, 1808.

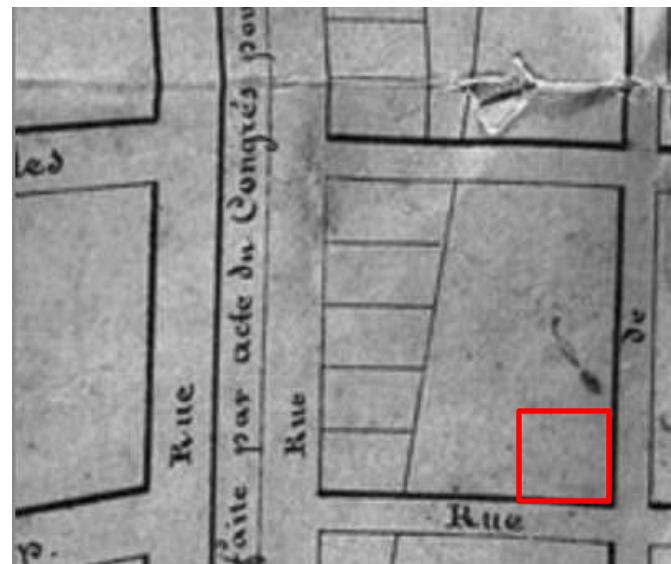


Figure 2. Plan de la Nouvelle-Orléans, 1816. The Historic New Orleans Collection



Figure 3. New Orleans General Guide and Land Intelligence, 1841

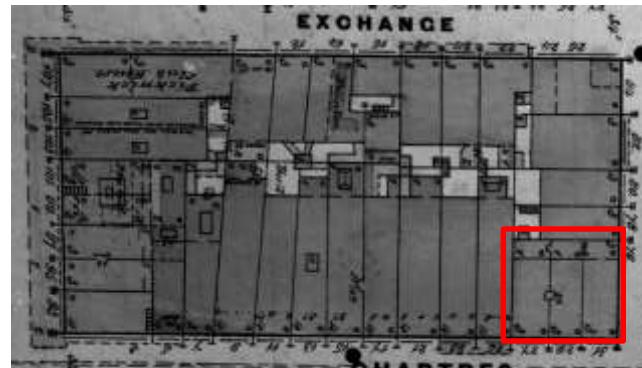


Figure 4. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, New Orleans 1876

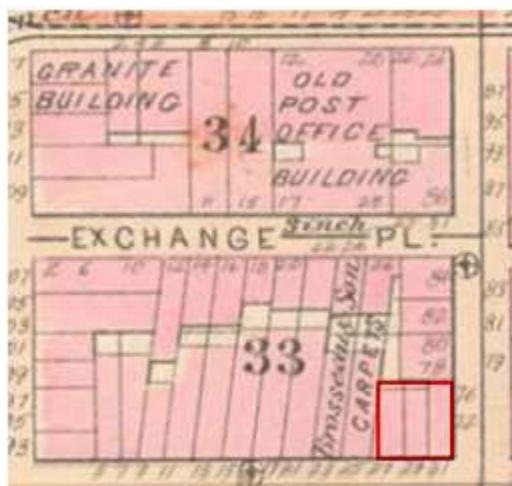


Figure 5. Robinson Atlas, 1883

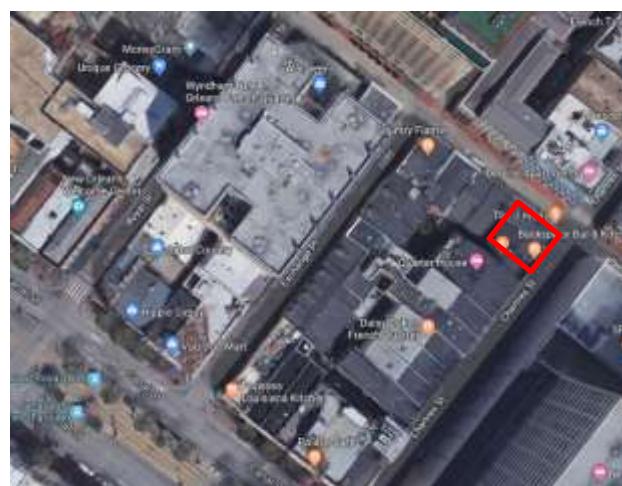


Figure 6. Google Maps, 2018

## General History



Figure 7. View of a building on the corner of Iberville and Chartres Streets in New Orleans, undated, probably 1950's

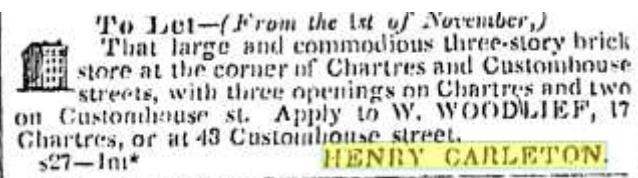


Figure 8. Ad, The Times-Picayune, October 1, 1845

the corner of Chartres and Customhouse streets, with three openings on Chartres and two on Customhouse."<sup>1</sup> The first appearance in the notarial record was in 1848, when the property was transferred from Henry Carleton to Dr. Thomas Hunt; in the record, it is described as a "certain three story brick building...now occupied as a book store by Mr. Gaston Buslé and standing in part of a lot of ground bought by Henry Carleton from

The earliest mention of a building at 135-141 Chartres Street was in a real estate ad from The Times-Picayune in 1845, where it's described as "that large and commodious three-story brick store at

<sup>1</sup> (To Let 1845)

Ferdinand Lioteaux.<sup>2</sup> The property stayed in Dr. Hunt's family until 1921, at which point it sold to Max Miller, and then passed on to multiple owners throughout the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 9. Awning of Up Stairs Lounge, Iberville St., 1973. Still from *Pride and...* documentary

and used the money to rent the second floor of the building from Mr. Guarino, and opened a gay bar, the Up Stairs Lounge.<sup>5</sup> Buddy Rasmussen was brought on as the bartender/manager.<sup>6</sup> The lounge was, as the name would suggest, upstairs, and was only accessible from an entrance on the Iberville Street elevation of the building.<sup>7</sup> It spanned the entire second floor of the structure and occupied three separate rooms.<sup>8</sup> The Up Stairs Lounge was far enough away from the other local gay bars, which were all located in the center of the French Quarter, that it, at first, struggled to attract a clientele.<sup>9</sup> In order to build a customer base, Rasmussen introduced the "Beer Bust," two hours set aside on Sunday nights, where for a \$1.50 cover charge, customers received all-you-can-drink pitchers of beer.<sup>10</sup> The crowds quickly grew and a cluster of devoted

The building has a long commercial history, and has housed, among other businesses, an auction house, a bookstore, and multiple restaurants and bars, including the Up Stairs Lounge.

In 1970, the building was owned by Anthony Guarino.<sup>4</sup> Phil Esteve inherited \$15,000 from his mother,

<sup>2</sup> (The Collins C. Diboll Vieux Carre Digital Survey n.d.)

<sup>3</sup> (The Collins C. Diboll Vieux Carre Digital Survey n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> (The Collins C. Diboll Vieux Carre Digital Survey n.d.)

<sup>5</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014)

<sup>6</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014), (Fieseler 2018)

<sup>7</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014), (Fieseler 2018)

regulars frequented the bar, welcomed by the implicit message “You’re at home here. You’re one of us.”<sup>11</sup>



Figure 10. Death Scene is Viewed by Weary Trio, 1973.

up; several people jumped over the rail, some went up to the third floor.<sup>14</sup> Two men managed to survive by running directly into the flames down the stairs.<sup>15</sup> Rasmussen led a group of twenty to the safety of a neighboring rooftop.<sup>16</sup> Some men were able to squeeze through windows but most of them were impossible to pass because of burglar bars.<sup>17</sup> Others could not escape; even though firefighters were able to extinguish the fire in sixteen minutes, twenty nine people were dead on the scene, and three more died from their injuries over the next several days.<sup>18</sup>

While the fire received nationwide coverage, the story was treated in a way that would be unthinkable today: the States-Item reported the bodies were “stacked like pancakes,” otherwise progressive Mayor Moon Landrieu didn’t bother to mention the incident, Governor Edwin Edwards declined to declare a statewide day of mourning, and the Catholic Archdiocese, led by Archbishop Hannan, refused to offer condolences to the families of those who had perished.<sup>19</sup> Hannan even went so far as to instruct his clergy not to give Catholic funeral services to any of the victims of the fire,

It was on one of the “Beer Bust” Sunday nights, June 24, 1973, that the Up Stairs Lounge succumbed to the deadliest fire in modern New Orleans history.<sup>12</sup> The fire was started, by an arsonist, at the base of the stairwell and the staircase leading up to the bar “acted as a massive chimney flue, funneling heat, flames, and combustible gases, into the lounge....everything was in flames, and the source of the flames was the most obvious way out.”<sup>13</sup> Some people made it to the fire escape, which led

<sup>11</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014)

<sup>12</sup> (Fieseler 2018), (Delery-Edwards 2014), (Angus Lind 1973)

<sup>13</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014, 46), (Angus Lind 1973)

<sup>14</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014), (Angus Lind 1973)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

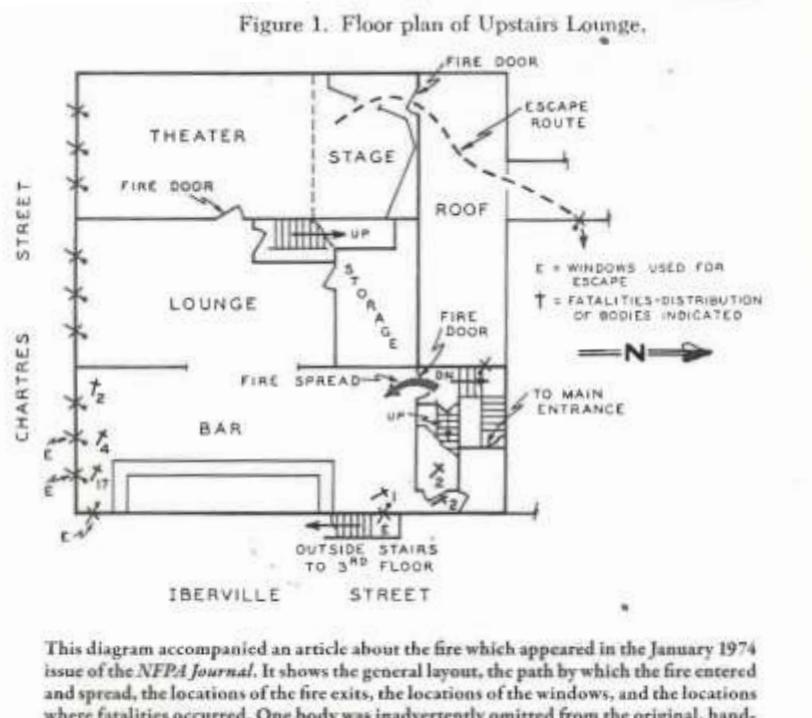
<sup>17</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> (ABC News 2018), (Delery-Edwards 2014), (Fieseler 2018)

nor to allow them to be buried in any of the local Catholic cemeteries.<sup>20</sup> Public opinion was likewise dismissive, there were "snide jokes or moralistic statements about the evils of homosexuality."<sup>21</sup> A popular local radio commentator, Bob Ruby, joked that the remains should be "buried in fruit jars."<sup>22</sup> Not all coverage was unsympathetic, The Times-Picayune ran a poignant piece by Clancy DuBos, about the survivors who were brought to Charity Hospital, and The States Item's staff reporter, Lanny Thomas, wrote, "Is there as much public sympathy and concern for the victims as there were for those of the Rault Center and Howard Johnson's? If there is, where are all the statements of sympathy from the clergy and public officials?"<sup>23</sup>

The NOPD, NOFD, and the State Fire Marshall ran concurrent investigations into the arson, along with the coroner's office, whose investigation ran in tandem with NOPD's.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the State Fire Marshall concluded that the arsonist was an ousted patron of the bar, and presented its investigation to the District Attorney's office, who declined to prosecute.<sup>25</sup> To present, no one has ever been arrested, or charged, in affiliation with the arson at the Up Stairs Lounge.



This diagram accompanied an article about the fire which appeared in the January 1974 issue of the *NFPA Journal*. It shows the general layout, the path by which the fire entered and spread, the locations of the fire exits, the locations of the windows, and the locations where fatalities occurred. One body was inadvertently omitted from the original, hand-drawn diagram made by the New Orleans Fire Department (reprinted with permission from *NFPA Journal* (Vol. 68, #1) © 1974, National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA. All rights reserved). *NFPA Journal* is a registered trademark of the National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA 02169.

Figure 11. Floorplan of Upstairs Lounge showing fatalities, 1974

<sup>20</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014)

<sup>21</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014), (Angus Lind 1973)

<sup>22</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014, 182), (Perez 2013), (Kopplin 2016)

<sup>23</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014), (DuBos 1973)

<sup>24</sup> (Delery-Edwards 2014)

<sup>25</sup> (ABC News 2018), (Delery-Edwards 2014)



Figure 12. News footage of fire, 1973.



## Building Description



Figure 3. 135 - 141 Chartres St., 2018

135-141 Chartres Street is a three-story, stucco over brick, commercial building with three entrances on Chartres Street and two entrances on Iberville Street. The legal description of the property is: 1. Square 33 Lot A C 17 Chartres 2. Iberville 64x57 3.604 Iberville. There are nine windows on each of the upper stories of the Chartres Street facing elevation. The third story windows are 6/6; the second story windows are 6/9. On the Iberville facing elevation, there are five 6/6 windows on the third story and five 6/9

windows on the second story. All windows on the second and third elevations are double hung wood windows and are topped with thick rectangular lintels. The building is topped by a relatively simple entablature with a denticulated cornice.

The first floor of the building features three separate entrances with different addresses. 135 Chartres Street has a very simple rectangular doorway framed by Doric pilasters, with a heavy lintel between them, surrounding a shortened solid wood French door. Two more Doric pilasters are at the edges of the structure. 137 Chartres, likewise, has a doorway framed by Doric pilasters. Here, they surround 10-pane French doors. Two bay windows are set to either side of the pilasters. At 141 Chartres, the rhythm of Doric pilasters repeats, the doors in this instance, are shorter pane over panel French doors, with wood infill above. Two store front windows are set to either side of the pilasters. Underneath the windows, the brick is painted, but not stuccoed. As the building wraps



Figure 44. 135-139, 141 Chartres, 1963

around to the Iberville elevation, seven Doric pilasters appear in the same interval structure that was present on Chartres Street, but there are no openings other than a blind window between the fifth and sixth pilasters, and a simple modern door past the seventh pilaster.

There is a fire escape on the Iberville facing elevation, which runs from the third window from Chartres Street on the third story to the fourth window on the Iberville facing elevation. A heavy band wraps around the structure to demarcate the first story from the second.



Figure 15. Onlookers, 1973

### Statement of Significance and Staff Recommendation

The Central Business District Historic District Commission evaluates the significance of a structure based on four criteria, as established by Section 84.22 of the City Code, any one of which can make a building eligible for nomination. The Up Stairs Lounge fire was, up until the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016, the largest attack on LGBTQ individuals in American history. Thirty two people were murdered, and their deaths were either ignored or treated like a punchline.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association listed "sexual orientation disturbance" as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which wasn't removed until 1987.<sup>26</sup> The World Health Organization didn't remove homosexuality from its International Classification of Diseases until 1992.<sup>27</sup> Most gay people in New Orleans in 1973 had to live a life "in the closet," and under that veil of secrecy, gay bars were one of the only refuges available.<sup>28</sup> The arson at the Up Stairs

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<sup>26</sup> (Burton 2015)

<sup>27</sup> (Burton 2015), (World Health Organization 2018)

<sup>28</sup> (ABC News 2018)

Lounge ripped away the veneer of a safe space, but ultimately, forced the citizens of New Orleans to recognize the presence of the City's incredibly large gay community; an informal survey in 1971 estimated that there were 75,000 gay residents in the City.<sup>29</sup> According to 1972's Bob Damron's Address Book, a guidebook for gay travelers, New Orleans had two bathhouses, twenty-four gay and lesbian bars, and three gay restaurants, at that time.<sup>30</sup> The gay population in the City has grown even larger; it was reported by the New York Times in 2015, that New Orleans has the fourth largest population of LGBTQ residents in the country.<sup>31</sup>

Fittingly, public reaction to the fire has changed since 1973; on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fire, Archbishop Gregory Aymond apologized for the Catholic Church's previous silence on the tragedy, Mayor Mitch Landrieu issued a proclamation of acknowledgement, and a number of commemoration events happened around the City. The fire at the Up Stairs Lounge was a tragic horrible event that deserves to be remembered as a cultural and historic moment without precedent; as such, the staff recommends nomination of this building for study as a landmark, as it overwhelmingly meets the criteria of being a building associated with an "important events in national, state, or local history."

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<sup>29</sup> (Fieseler 2018, 16)

<sup>30</sup> (Fieseler 2018, 16)

<sup>31</sup> (David Leonhardt 2015)

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## Figure Attribution

Cover Image. Author's Own

Figure 1. Plan de la Ville de la Nouvelle-Orléans avec les noms des propriétaires, 1808.  
The Historic New Orleans Collection  
[https://www.hnoc.org/vcs/more\\_maps.php?set=2](https://www.hnoc.org/vcs/more_maps.php?set=2)

Figure 2. Plan de la Nouvelle-Orléans, 1816. The Historic New Orleans Collection  
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Figure 3. New Orleans General Guide and Land Intelligence, 1841  
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Figure 10. Death Scene is Viewed by Weary Trio, 1973. Times-Picayune, June 25 1973, 1.

Figure 11. Floor plan showing fatalities Delery-Edwards, Clayton. 2014. *The Up Stairs Lounge Arson*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 86.

Figure 12. News footage of fire, 1973. *Prejudice & Pride: Revisiting the tragic fire that killed 32 in a New Orleans gay bar*. Directed by Brian Epstein. Performed by ABC News.

Figure 13. Author's Own

Figure 14. 135-139, 141 Chartres, 1963. "The Collins C. Diboll Vieux Carre Digital Survey." (*The Historic New Orleans Collection*®. Accessed November 2, 2018. [https://www.hnoc.org/vcs/property\\_info.php?lot=11186-A](https://www.hnoc.org/vcs/property_info.php?lot=11186-A).

Figure 15. Video Still. 2018. *Prejudice & Pride: Revisiting the tragic fire that killed 32 in a New Orleans gay bar*. Directed by Brian Epstein. Performed by ABC News.