

Staff Report on Landmark Nomination of
The Pitot House

Pitot House, built on the shores of Bayou St. John in 1799-1800, is an outstanding example of early Louisiana plantation-style architecture. The Louisiana Landmarks Society, who was responsible for rescuing the house from threatened demolition, presently owns and operates it as a period house museum.

In 1708, a decade prior to the founding of New Orleans, concessions were granted to Antoine Rivarde de la Vigne and others for the lands along Bayou St. John. This area, which is one of the highest in the City, was the site of the Indian village which Bienville is believed to have established in 1718, in anticipation of the development of a permanent community. As the new City grew, Bayou St. John became a valuable waterway linking Lake Ponchartrain with the River and the Gulf. During the latter part of the eighteenth century, many settlers began arriving in New Orleans from France, Spain and the West Indies. It was at this time that some of the City's more wealthy citizens began building their homes along Bayou St. John. The area was actually suburban in character, although the houses resembled those being built on plantations along the Mississippi River.

Pitot House is named for James Pitot, the first democratically elected mayor of New Orleans. Prior to 1810, when Pitot bought the house, the property had belonged to other prominent individuals. In 1799, Don Bartolome Bosque bought the land on which the house was originally located. At that time, there was no mention of any buildings in the act of sale. When he sold it to Joseph Reynes the following year, however, there was a building. It is presently believed that this is the existing building and that it was completed by Reynes in 1800. Bosque had built a house on Chartres Street in 1795 and he may have also been the builder for this structure. Reynes sold the property in 1805 to the widow of Vincent Rillieux, who in turn sold it to Pitot. The house continued to change hands during the 1800's, some of the more important owners being Felix Ducayet, Jean Louis Tissot and A. L. Tissot, who was a prominent judge.

In 1904, Mother Francis Xavier Cabrini bought the house for use by herself and the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. St. Cabrini, who was the first United States citizen to be canonized, was known for her work with Italian immigrants and her concern for and care of orphans. The Sisters, who retained ownership of the property, decided in 1963 to demolish the house in order to build a high school. Following extensive negotiations aimed at saving the building, it was

agreed that the Louisiana Landmarks Society would accept the house as a gift and move it to another location. The site was a nearby City playground, changing the address of the building from 1370 Moss Street to 1440 Moss Street. Although the grounds are owned by the City, the Louisiana Landmarks Society retains full ownership of the building, and it is only the building and not the land that is being considered for landmark designation.

The painstaking restoration of the house was aided by the existence of a c. 1830 drawing of the house done by the French artist Charles Alexandre Lesueur during a visit to New Orleans. Although some of the massive brick columns had to be rebuilt following the move, all of the upper portion of the structure is original.

Pitot House was built during the Spanish period of rule, though its architectural style was largely derived from French and West Indies sources. This two-story building shares many architectural characteristics with the larger scale plantation houses, most notably the double-pitched hipped roof extending over the galleries. Both these recessed galleries and the French doors are elements found on houses in the West Indies, where the climate is similar to that of southern Louisiana. The walls of Pitot House are of brick-between-post covered with stucco, a typical construction method of the period. The open galleries that surround two sides of the house are supported by round brick columns on the ground floor and slender colonettes connected by a wooden railing on the second story. The gallery on the rear of the house is screened by blinds with adjustable horizontal slats. A massive iron gate encloses the loggia located beneath this gallery. The door and window openings of the house are segmentally arched and are flanked by batten shutters.

On the basis of a careful consideration of the four areas of criteria determining landmark qualification, any one of which will qualify a property for designation, the staff of the Historic District Landmarks Commission finds that Pitot House meets the requirements of three of these categories, in that it reflects the broad cultural, political, economic, and social history of the state and community; is identified with historic personages in local history; and embodies distinguishing characteristics of architectural typesk inherently valuable for a study of periods, styles, methods of construction, and indigenous materials or craftsmanship.

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