

THE CLARKE HOUSE
1620\|Eighth Street

Architectural Rating: Blue
Construction Date: 1845-46
Architect: Attributed to James Gallier, St.

Nomination Information

Date: October 11, 1984
Nominated by: Camille Strachan
Seconded by: Joanne Whitley, Marc Cooper

Site Description

Square 225, Lot "X" (formerly 2 and 3)
Fourth Municipal District, Eleventh Assessment District
Zoning: RM-3
Lot size: 69'5" front on Eighth St., 69'10"2" front on Harmony St., 73'1"4" front on Carondelet St. side, and 81'0"1" front on St. Charles Ave. side.
Owner: Mr. John Geiser, III

The nomination of this property was based on its architectural significance. Each of the four areas of criteria used in determining landmark qualification, as outlined in City Ordinance #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.

Architectural Significance

The Clarke house, at 1620 Eighth Street, has a history that illustrates the growth of the Garden District from an area of rural plantations to the site of many lovely mansions. What is known today as the Garden District corresponds roughly with the former Livaudais Plantation, which ran northward from the river. This plantation, along with those of d'Hauterive, Broutin, Darby and Carriere were subdivided into lots in the early nineteenth century, forming the faubourgs Muns, Lafayette, and Livaudais. The Livaudais plantation area was purchased in 1832 by four men, Matthew Morgan, Samuel Jarvis Peters, Levi Pierce, and William Henry Chase, and then subdivided by Benjamin Buisson, surveyor, in the same year. The next year, 1833, the three faubourgs were incorporated into the City of Lafayette. The speculators Samuel Kohn and Hart Moses Shiff bought up the former Livaudais lots in 1832 and 1837, and sold so many in the 1840's that standardized forms had to be printed to record the sales. The City of Lafayette developed rapidly in the decades after its incorporation, and was annexed to the City of New Orleans in 1852.

Mrs. J. Clavitt Clarke bought lots five and six in Square 174 for \$400 from Kohn and Shiff in 1845. Her husband was a Judge for the parish of Jefferson during the years when the City of Lafayette was the seat of the parish government, and it was only natural that the Clarkes would want a stylish residence near the Jefferson Parish Courthouse, which was on Jackson Avenue at the time. Lot four in square 174 was bought for \$130 at an auction on April 4, 1845 in the name of Judge Clarke, but it was purchased by a bookkeeper by the name of John Turpin on Clarke's account.

On July 1, 1846, Judge Clarke bought lot seven in the same square from Samuel Kohn for \$380, and then on May 20, 1847 he bought lots two and three from Melissa Stewart McNeil for \$400. So by 1847 the Clarkes owned the entire square except for two lots along Carondelet St. (formerly Apollo St.).

The Clarke's home was constructed in the latter part of 1845 and/or early 1846. It was built facing St. Charles Avenue on lots four, five and six, which were purchased in early 1845. We know that a house existed there by March 14, 1846, because of a mortgage for \$800 on those three lots signed by Judge and Mrs. Clarke in favor of Judge Clarke's mother, Mrs. Marth Clarke. The mortgage states that this money was "expended in the building and improvements now existing on said mortgaged premises." No building contract was found, and the city directory is only helpful in 1849, when Clarke is listed as residing on the corner of Nayades (now St. Charles Ave.) and Eighth, Lafayette. No directories are available for 1847 or 1848, and the 1846 edition lists no residence for J.C. Clarke.

Judge Clarke died in 1854, but his widow continued to live in the family home until 1867, when she moved to Brooklyn, New York. On November 25, 1867, Colonel George Soule bought the house and grounds from the widow and children of Judge Clarke for \$10,000. Soule was President of Soule Business College, and had been since 1856, the year in which he founded it, and had just returned from the war. He and his family lived in the Clarke house just as it was for two years, then decided they would like a grander home, but on the same spot on St. Charles Avenue. The 1850's had been a period of rapid development along the avenue and in the Garden District, since the New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad, chartered in 1852, had provided easy access to this lovely area near the thriving portions of the city. Many mansions and fine homes were being built in the area. To get a larger home in such a desirable location, the Soule's simply moved the Clarke house back to its present location on lots two and three on the same square and continued to live in it there until 1874 when their house on St. Charles was completed.

The City Directories list the Soules as living at "St. Charles, corner Eighth" in 1868 and 1869, but at "Eighth, corner St. Charles" in 1870-74. Other evidence that the house was moved in 1869 was found during a renovation in 1970: pieces of newspaper used as wedges behind door frames and hinges (to compensate for the inevitable shifting and settling of the house during the move) which are dated July, 1869. It seems that beginning from the time the house was moved in 1869, the Soules took in tenants on one side of the double and lived in the other side themselves, because a wedding invitation addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Flower was also found behind a mantel in the house during the 1970 renovation. The City Directories for 1870 and 1871 list Mr. and Mrs. Flower as living on "Eighth St. between St. Charles and Carondelet", so obviously the house was moved before that time. By 1874, however, the City Directory listed the Soules again on "St. Charles, corner of Eighth."

The Clarke house remained in the Soule family's possession for seventy-seven years, until 1944, when it was sold, along with the Soule house on St. Charles and all six of the lots in that square, to Mrs. Elsie Block Bel. The Soule home on St. Charles was demolished and replaced with an apartment building soon thereafter. Mrs. Bel lived at 1620 Eighth St. on one side of the double, and Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Maclemore Hicks lived on the other side. The Hicks's had actually been living there since 1941, and in 1946 they bought the whole house from Mrs. Bel and converted it into a single-family home. They also expanded upon the garden that is there today. In 1970 the present owner, Mr. John Geiser III purchased the home from the Hicks's for \$28,000 and renovated it, with the help of Barry Fox of Koch and Wilson Architects, restoring it to the condition in which we see it today.

The Clarke house is a pure, classical Greek Revival structure. Its design has been attributed to the architect James Gallier, Sr. and exhibits the clean, simple lines of the true Greek Revival movement. Basically a four-bay town-house in plan, it was built as a double residence. Converted to a single home in 1946 by Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Maclemore Hicks, and renovated in 1970 by Mr. John Geiser, III, it maintains the original organization of four rooms in front of a stairwell, with four smaller rooms in a back wing, all of which was previously divided by a solid central wall. It is two stories tall, with full-width front galleries on both levels, and side galleries on the second floor of the rear wing. The galleries are supported on each level by five wooden box columns with Doric capitals and bases. The balustrade is wooden with simple square balusters. The cornice is thought not to be original, having probably been added in 1869 when the building was moved from St. Charles Avenue. The earlier cornice would have been simpler, possibly with a box parapet like the one on the house at 1529 Clio Street, which Gallier did for Greer Duncan in the mid 1840's. The present cornice is large, obscuring any view of the roofline, and has widely spaced mutules, which are large dentil blocks, beneath the uppermost projection. The mutules are paired above the columns.

Weatherboards cover the building on the front and sides. The four full-length openings on each level are surrounded by simple frames and have louvered shutters. All of the other windows in the house receive the same treatment. Although the first-level openings are now identical, before the renovation by Koch and Wilson the outer two were used as doors, with taller surrounds topped by a simple projecting cornice, and transoms above the doors. One of those original doors has been moved to the right side of the building where the entranceway is now.

The brick wall on the St. Charles Avenue side of the property was erected during the time the Hick's owned the property (1946-70), which was also the time when the garden on the side of the house was planted. The brick wall on the Carondelet side of the house was added in 1970, and the gate in it came from the house of A.A. Maginnis, the father of John Maginnis and founder of Maginnis Cotton Seed Oil and Soap Works, which was demolished.

The house and its garden are a well-maintained example of a Greek Revival home built in the Garden District in the mid-nineteenth century, and a tribute to the refined tastes of earlier generations of New Orleanians.

Historical Personages

The builder of the house at 1620 Eighth Street was Joseph Calvitt Clarke, who was a lawyer and a judge in the third judicial district for the parish of Lafayette. He was born in 1808 and died in 1854, at the age of forty-six. He had five children, two of whom were born in the Clarke house. An article after Clarke's death in the Commercial Bulletin, December 4, 1854, was headed "Death of a Good Man". The article said "though comparatively a young man ... he had been identified with New Orleans for more than twenty years, occupying during that time several responsible positions in society He was for some years Judge of the Third District Court of Jefferson Parish ... and also a licensed preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church He had been instrumental in originating and sustaining a church among the slaves of this city that now numbers a thousand members. Here is practical philanthropy for you."

George Soule purchased the Clarke house in 1867. He was born in New York in 1834, and lived for some years in Illinois and Missouri before moving to New Orleans in 1856, soon after graduating from the Jones Business College in St. Louis. He found his own Commercial College and Literary Institute that same year. Soule College grew to National renown because of the founder's belief that businessmen should be as well trained as those in professional fields. It was also the first business college in Louisiana to open its doors to women. During the seventy years when George Soule was the school's president, over forty thousand students passed through the doors, and he personally instructed many of them.

Soule was a soldier in the Civil War from 1862-65. He was wounded, captured, and imprisoned on Johnson's Island, Lake Erie, then exchanged in Vicksburg and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel before the end of the war. Back in New Orleans he became quite a civic leader, participating in Masonic fraternities and the Rex Carnival Association. He was king of Mardi Gras in 1887, and wrote the history of the carnival for its golden anniversary in 1922. He was also the author of an 880 page business textbook, called "Analytic and Philosophic, Commercial and Exchange Calculator," which was proclaimed at the time to be the great arithmetical work of the age.

It was Soule who had the Clarke house moved back to its present location so that he could build a large home on St. Charles Avenue. He lived in his new home for fifty-two years before he died in 1926 at the age of ninety-two, having been one of the leading citizens of New Orleans for seventy years.

Architect

Although no documentary evidence has been found, this house is linked to the architect James Gallier, Sr. One of the reasons for this is the relationship between Judge Clarke and John Turpin, Gallier's bookkeeper. Turpin, not Clarke was the one who bid on the property lot 4 in square 174 when it was put up for

auction April 4, 1885 by the speculators Kohn and Shiff. Turpin purchased the land for \$130.00 for Clarke, and because of the role Turpin had in this transaction, a case can be made that Gallier then proceeded to design the house for Clarke. There seems to be no other reason why Clarke would have retained Turpin to purchase the land for him. Nevertheless, no building contract could be found from March 1844 - April 1846 for this house. The lack of a building contract does not, however, preclude the possibility that Gallier could have built this house, because no contracts were found during those years for any buildings by Gallier, despite his being a leading architect at that time. It seems his clients felt written contracts were unnecessary.

Some evidence that provides a clearer link between Gallier and the Clarke is a plan for a house remarkably similar to Clarke's that was found among Gallier's papers. It is a double house with two two-story apartments, differing from the Clarke house only in the placement of the chimneys and windows, some of the room dimensions, the lack of a second story for the rear wing, and the second floor halls. In all other respects it could be the Clarke house plan.

Another plan executed by Gallier for a larger house on Clio Street also shows features almost identical to those on the Clarke house, particularly the box columns, wooden balustrade, and window frames. The Clio Street house has a simple cornice with a box parapet, which is how the original cornice at 1620 Eighth Street is believed to have looked. The Clarke house now has a larger cornice with some Italianate features probably added when the house was moved in 1869. Based on this evidence it certainly seems possible, and indeed probably, that this house was designed by James Gallier, Sr.

Gallier was born in Ireland in 1798 and studied architecture abroad until the age of thirty-four. At that time, 1832, he moved to New York where he lived for two years before coming South in search of better opportunities and larger commissions. He was almost immediately successful in New Orleans, forming a partnership first with Charles Dakin, then with his brother James H. Dakin, and then practicing on his own for years before his failing eyesight forced him to retire from architecture, taking up extensive travel to fill his days. Most of his works were done in a pure Greek Revival style, among the many being the first St. Charles Hotel (1834-36), the Boston Club (1844) Christ Church (1835-37) and the old City Hall, now Gallier Hall (1845-50). He also designed numerous residences and was one of the best and most influential of the mid-nineteenth century architects in New Orleans. Gallier died in the shipwreck of the steamer "Evening Star" in 1868.

Social Economic and Political History

None

Staff Recommendation:

For designation, based on architectural merit and association with leading figures in New Orleans history, Judge Joseph Calvitt Clarke and Colonel George Soule, as well as attribution to a famous architect, James Gallier, Sr.