

THE DRYADES STREET BRANCH, NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC LIBRARY  
1924 Philip Street

Architectural Rating: Blue  
Construction Date: 1914-1915  
Architect: William R. Burk, Contractor: E. Richarme

Nomination Information

Date: June 10, 1982  
Nominated by: Ron Purcell  
Seconded by: John Ernst, Jacqueline McPherson  
Recommended by: Staff

Site Description

Square 271, Lot B-12  
4th M.D., 11th A.D.  
Zoning: RM-4  
Lot Size: 72' x 60' x 12' x 23' x 60' x 83'

Owner: New Orleans Youth Foundation

The nomination of this property was based upon its importance to the social, economic, political and cultural history of New Orleans, its association with a historic personage, and for its architectural significance. Each of the four areas of criteria used in determining landmark qualification, as outlined in City Ordinance #5992 MCS 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

According to the records in the Office of Conveyance, the land upon which this building stands was acquired by the City of New Orleans on November 10, 1913. The land was purchased for the site of the fifth branch of the New Orleans Public Library which was to serve the needs of the city's Black population. The construction of the Dryades Street Branch was paid for by a large grant from the financier/philanthropist Andrew Carnegie which was made in June of 1912. The last grant, amounting to \$50,000, was to cover the additions to the main branch, as well as a branch for the use of the city's Blacks. The site for the library was suggested initially by a group of Black civic leaders. As the city was unable to acquire property on Dryades between Jackson and Philip as had been requested, the present site was acquired as a second choice. As a result of the construction of the Canal Branch, it was decided to hold another open competition, which was announced on February 11, 1914. On March 11, 1914, the plans submitted by William R. Burk were accepted by the Board of Directors. The construction bid of E. Richarme to build the library with Bedford stone trimming was accepted on August 12, 1914. The completed building was dedicated on October 23, 1915.

Burk's library is sited at the point where Dryades Street meets Philip Street a right angles and becomes a single lane street heading Uptown. The placement of the library at the end of the wide segment of Dryades Street adds greatly to its impact in a neighborhood comprised mainly of one and two story frame houses. The building is two stories high, with the ground floor being far lower in height than the main level. The exterior is finished in red pressed brick with the decorative details of Bedford stone. The street facade is divided into three wide bays, each framed by Ionic pilasters which flank a masonry arch. This tripartite scheme reflects the popular image of the triumphal arch, a device that was often copied by architects designing in the Beaux Arts manner. Perhaps its location at the end of a major street explains this design reference. The central bay contains the main entrance as well as the double staircase that leads from the street to the entrance. The street wall of the staircase is decorated by a handsomely detailed blind arch with a large keystone. The two flanking bays each feature a set of double doors that provide access to the ground floor. These doors are set in frames which are topped by an elaborate stone lintel.

The center bay of the second floor is dominated by the large entrance door-frame of Bedford stone designed in the form of a crossette or eared frame of the sort most often associated with the Greek Revival. The top of this frame takes the form of a broken pediment which frames an open book in stone, surrounded by carved ornament. While the frame survives intact, the original doors have

long since disappeared. The survival of excellent photographs and original drawings would make the restoration of these doors easy to accomplish. The main entrance is flanked by a pair of iron balconies which one enters through pairs of French doors. The large round arched openings which frame these two balconies have now largely been boarded over, but there appears to be little damage to the major window frame members, and the French doors are still intact. The spandrel panels above each of the three large masonry arches on the main floor facade are embellished with Bedford stone carvings of stylized foliage. The facade is topped off by a massive entablature with a dentilled cornice. In contrast to the rich nature of the facade, the side elevations, which are barely visible, are quite plain.

#### Architect

William R. Burk, the architect of the Dryades Street Branch, was also the co-designer with Joseph Lagarde of the Canal Branch completed in 1911. Born in 1888, Burk's architectural career lasted into the 1940's. The bulk of Burk's work came in many public and parochial schools he designed in several parishes other than Orleans. The two branch libraries are the only major public works by him in New Orleans.

#### Historic Personage

The Dryades Street Branch of the New Orleans Public Library, in addition to all of the branches built between 1905 and 1915, were funded largely through the generosity of Andrew Carnegie, the greatest philanthropist of the time. Upon his retirement from business in 1901, Carnegie devoted the last 18 years of his life to the disbursement of large sums of money for educational purposes. The most widespread of his charitable activities were his many donations for the construction of public libraries in the U.S. and England. Carnegie's interest in the New Orleans Public Library system is the result of his contact with the noted educator James Hardy Dillard, who was President of the library board during the construction of majority of the buildings. The structure in question was paid for by Carnegie's last grant to the city, in which he stipulated that a branch library for the city's Black population be constructed with the money.

#### Social, Economic, Political and Cultural History

The New Orleans Public Library system as we know it was the result of the merging in 1896 of two separate institutions, the Fisk Free Library, founded in the 1840's by Abijah and Alvarez Fisk, and the Lyceum Library, which was then housed in Gallier Hall. The Public Library's first home was St. Patrick's Hall on Lafayette Square. The first permanent home for the library was built in 1906-1908 at Lee Circle. Designed by the firm of Diboll and Owen, the \$250,000 construction cost was provided by Andrew Carnegie. Between 1908 and 1915, five branch libraries were built, all paid for by Carnegie funds. From its dedication in 1915 until 1946, the Dryades Street Branch was the only library facility available to the Black population of New Orleans. The meeting rooms of the ground floor were used by many Black civic groups, with the Y.M.C.A. being the first in 1917, followed by the Negro Board of Trade, the Negro History and Study Club, the Colored Young Men's Business Association and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.