THE HARRIS-MAGINNIS HOUSE
2127 Prytania Street

Architectural Rating: Blue
Construction Date: 1858
Architect: James Calrow

Nomination Information
Date: April 23, 1984
Nominated by : Joanne Whitley
Seconded by: Marc Cooper, Terrence O'Brien, William Wessel, Ron Pursell, John Ernst, Jane Brooks, and Camille Strachan.
Recommended by: Staff

Site Description
Square 210, Lot E
Fourth Municipal District, Twelfth Assessment District
Zoning: C1-A
Owners: Investment and Developing, Inc.

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural significance. Each of the four areas of criteria used in determining landmark qualification, as outlined in CityOrdinance #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 tc designate the property.

Architectural Significance

The house at 2127 Prytania is a fine Greek Revival building, constructed in 1858 by James Calrow, architect, and William Day, builder. The history of the land on which the house sits goes back much farther, though. This land was originally part of the plantation of Don Jacinto Panis, a Spanish officer. He owned eight arpents, or one thousand four hundred feet, along the river, extending back to approximately where St. Charles Avenue is now. The central road, "Cours Panis" became Jackson Avenue. Panis purchased the property in 1719, and his family lived there and operated a prosperous plantation until 1813, when Panis's widow decided to sell off some of the land after his death. One hundred lots were offered for sale, according to a plan drawn up by the surveyor F. V. Portier in 1813. Five years later Panis's daughter sold the rest of the land for $100,000 to John Poultney, who subdivided the remaining area, extending the streets of the neighboring Faubourgs Annunication and Nuns through it. The area developed rapidly and became part of the City of Lafayette, incorporated in 1832, and annexed to the City of New Orleans in 1852.

According to the Conveyence Office records, Rufus McIlhenny owned the lot on Prytania before 1855, although he was never listed in the city directory as living there. He sold the lot in January of that year to Mrs. Levin Covington for $13,000. It retroceded back to McIlhenny on July 8, 1857, and twelve days later he sold it to Alexander Harris, a wealthy cotton factor, for $12,000. The next year Harris bought an additional lot on Jackson Avenue from William P. Saunders for $7,000, putting together the packet of land on which the building sits today. Harris died in 1869 of "pernicious fever" and on May 6, 1871 the estate of Alexander Harris sold the entire property to Mrs. John H. McGinnis for $38,000. The Maginnis family kept the property until February 21, 1922,

when the succession of Mrs. Maginnis gave the property to her daughter, Mrs. Josephine Maginnis Rose. Mrs. Rose sold the house, on loc C, to Kohlman Mexic for $17,350, and the corner lot to William Henderson for $10,500 in the same year, 1922. In 1923 Mexic sold the house for $14,000 to John Pareti, who owned it for two years and then sold it to the New Orleans Federation of Clubs for $19,968. Nine years later, on April 26, 1934, the Thrift Homestead Association seized the property and sold it back to Mrs. J. M. Rose for $19,000. Mrs. Rose owned the house for four more years, until December 13, 1938, when she donated the house to the American National Red Cross. During the next twelve years the house served as the Orleans Parish Chapter House, providing office space for the Red Cross administrative and volunteer activities.

The Henderson family owned the corner lot from 1922 until 1949. It was then owned briefly by Sylvester W. Labrot, Jr. who sold it to the Red Cross in 1950 for $10,500. In 1954 the Red Cross sold both lots to Dr. Clyde E. Crassons for $55,000. He owned the property at least until 1963, and had it renovated during those years. Most recently it was owned by the People of the Living God, a non-sectarian Gospel Temple, and was used as a home for missionaries until December 3, 1983, when it was sold to the present owners, Investment and Developing, Inc. for $650,000 cash.

The date of construction for this house has been established as 1858, in part because of an entrance in a diary belonging to T. K. Wharton, an architect and prolific note-taker. Wharton wrote that in February of 1858 he visited the building site with the house's architect, James Calrow, and that "it promises to be the handsomest piece of work in the district." The tax assessment record for 1857 shows the land belonging to Mrs. Levin Covington and valued at $8,000, with a notation that it was sold to Alex Harris for $12,000. The tax assessment record for 1858 was not available, but the city directory was, and it indicated that the residence of Alexander Harris was at the corder of Prytania and Jackson, whereas in 1857 Harris was listed as residing on Bourbon Street. No building contract was found along with the original act of sale in the notarial archives, but the architect, Calrow, was listed in the city directory for only one year, 1858. It is assumed that Calrow came to town to execute two important commissions, this one and the house at 1239 First Street. The First Street property was purchased in 1857 by Alexander Hamilton Brevard, and along with the act of sale the original building contract for that house was found. After both these projects were completed in 1858, Calrow left town again. He was not listed in the 1859 city directory, nor any year thereafter. The builder of this house was William Day.

The Harris-Maginnis house is a fine example of a raised Greek Revival center-hall villa. It has a gallery across the front and along the uptown side of the house, which is bordered by no fewer than eleven fluted Corinthian columns and a cast iron railing. This can also be referred to as an "American cottage" because it has five bays with a central entranceway, emphasized by an elaborate frame and reached via wide wooden steps. Other characteristic features of this houst type include the low side gabled roof with three dormers, and the fact that it is raised off the ground and sits back on its lot behind an iron fence.

The Greek Revival has been called the first real American architectural style, and some say that it is actually not a revival at all, but a true reflection of the tastes and values of a young America, based on the forms of antiquity. Stuart and Revett's The Antiquities of Athens, published in London in 1762, sparked interests in England and in America, but the the Greek Revival style did not become widespread here until the appearance in the 1830's and 40's of architectural handbooks. The earliest handbooks were those of Asher Benjamin, which first came out in 1797. An architect of the next generation, Minard Lafever, was to become even more well-known. Lafever was a partner of James Gallier, Sr.,s for a short period of time, and also know James H. Dakin.

In New Orleans the Greek Revival style was "tempered" in many cases by concerns of the climate and prevailing French and Spanish architectural styles. In this house one can see the influence of the old French plantation style, for example, in the full-length openings across the front giving access to the broad gallery, which is covered by a wide overhanging roof. This allowed for maximum circulation and protection from the hot sun. There was also a growing interest in America in Italianate architecture, beginning in the 1840's and 50's in other areas of the country, and some Italianate details began to appear on otherwise Greek Revival buildings here around mid-century. But the Greek Revival features dominated in this house, particularly in the Corinthian columns, the door and window frames, and the heavy entablature decorated with classical dentils and modillions. Asher Benjamin, in The American Builder's Companion (1827) said that the Corinthian order, "being the most splendid of all the orders....is proper for all buildings where elegance, gaiety and magnificance are required." The use of this order on the Harris-Maginnis house, conceived as it was on a grand scale and for a wealthy merchant, was certainly appropriate and demonstrated the desired effects.

Doorways in Greek Revival buildings tended to have more elaborate surrounds while the windows were framed simply. The main entrance at 2127 Prytania has a single wooden door with a large window (probably a later replacement for the original) set in a delicate frame and having narrow rectangular sidelights and a transom. The transom is flanked by thin decorative scrolls, and the whole thing is surrounded by a three-quarter round molding intricately carved with a spiraling leaf and band pattern. This doorway is recessed behind a larger framework made up of engaged Corinthian pilasters supporting a segmental archway with a symbolic keystone, carved with the classical acanthus leaf motif. This segmental arch is one of the few concessions on this building to the trend toward Italianate features. The reveals of the large framework are slanted to show off a paneled area with acanthus decorations.

The full-length windows have nine-over-nine light sash and are set in relatively simple frames. Above the glass is an oval paneled area, topped off with a projecting cornice that reaches to the soffit. Beside the paneled areas are the same decorative scrolls that flanked the transom; here they visually support the cornices. The windows have louvered shutters.

The heavy entablature is made up of the architrave directly above the column capitals, a plain freize, and then a projecting cornice. The freize is separated from the architrave by horizontal moldings called a string course. Between the freize and the cornice are both a dentil course and a mutule course, which is

made up of modillions, or very small brackets. The use of these closely-spaced blocks provides an interesting pattern of light and dark that contrasts with the plainer areas of the entablature, and helps balance the elaborate capitals beneath them. This entablature is simpler than the one shown in Benjamin's 1928 American Builder's Companion; it replaces three courses of decorative molding with plain moldings or fascia boards. It is interesting to note that this plainer treatment was duplicated exactly in The American Vignola, published almost fifty years later, in 1906 by William Robert Ware, the head of America's first architectural school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and, later, founder of Columbia University's School of Architecture. Ware codified, and modified slightly, the canons of classical architecture for the "American Renaissance." His drawings reflect a true American feeling in the forms of ancient Greece.

Above the entablature can be seen another feature contributed by New Orleans' taste and not prescribed by traditional Greek Revival formulas. It is the parapet, composed of six box-like sections with oval panels in the center of each section. The two central sections above the entryway are the tallest; the adjacent sections decrease in height, forming a step-like pattern. The effect of the entablature topped by the parapet successfully screens out any view of the roof from the front.

The three dormer windows can, however, be seen above the parapet, and they exhibit a few more Italianate details. Their pediments have a classical feel, but beneath them are elliptically arched windows with decorative panes. The overhang from the roofs of the gables is supported by small though rather decorative brackets, paired at the corners. From the side of the house one can see that these same brackets run beneath the upper roofline all around the house.

The plan of this house is basically rectangular, with a polygonal bay projecting from the right side near the rear. There is a two story brick service wing attached in the back which has side galleries on both levels. The main structure, which is one-and-a-half stories, is made of wood, and sits on a high brick base. Weatherboards cover the sides, with flush siding on the facade. On the lower level, brick piers project slightly beneath each of the columns. The brick is covered with stucco in the front but left exposed on the sides. There are several vents in the stucco which retain their original ironwork, but the whole lower level has been enclosed and now has some modern windows and a door as well. On the left side of the main level is a large triple window with arched heads and decorative glazing, set in a framework with applied rosette ornaments and a cornice supported by the same scrolls as seen on the entryway. Finally, two small modern structures stand on the lot - a work shed and a car port. Except for these small structures and the base level alterations, this fine Greek Revival building has undergone no major changes since its construction by James Calrow in 1858 for Alexander Harris.

Historic Personages

The best-known resident of the house was John Henry Maginnis, whose wife purchased the property in 1871 for $38,000, after Harris's death. John Henry Maginnis was a member of the important and respected Maginnis family, and one of five sons of Ambrose Maginnis, considered, according to the Times Picayune, "one of the wealthiest and most successful men in the South." He was the founder of the Maginnis Cotton Seed Oil Mill and Soap Works, which once had its office on the corner of Julia and Tchoupitoulas Streets. The larger Maginnis Cotton building, erected by John in 1884, still stands at 1050 Constance Street, and is a city landmark. John Maginnis oversaw the company's oil works, among other things, and was considered "a model man of business," as well as being a prominent member of the Pickwick Club and other social organizations. He met a tragic death at the age of forty-four, eighteen years after the purchase of the house, when he was struck by lightning on the beach near the family's summer home in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, in 1889. He funeral was held at Trinity Church.

Architect

See Above

Cultural, Political, Economic and Social History

None

Staff Recommendation

For designation, based on architectural significance.