

The Martin Behrman Home
228 Pelican Street

Architectural Rating: Green
Construction Date: 1896
Architect: Unknown

Nomination Information
Date: November 6, 1984
Nominated by: Owners

Site Description
Fifth Municipal District, Thirteenth Assessment District
Square 8, Lot 12 and half of 11
Lot size: 45'x 120'
Zoning: RD-3
Owners: Karen Obenshain and Robert Simon

The nomination of this property was based upon its connection with Mayor Martin Behrman, a person of major significance in the history of the city of New Orleans. Each of the four criteria used in determining landmark qualification, as outlined in City Ordinance #5992 M.C.S., will be examined individually. This information will be the basis for a final decision about the designation of this property.

Historic Personages

The house at 228 Pelican Street in Algiers was the home of one of New Orleans' most illustrious mayors, Martin Behrman. He served for more years than any other mayor, beginning in 1904 when he was forty years old and ending with his death while in office in 1926, at the age of sixty-two. After his first term, he was reelected in 1908, 1912, and in 1916. He lost the mayor's race in 1920 by a small margin, but made a comeback in 1924 when he was elected to his fifth term at the age of sixty. At the time of his death he was involved in such projects as an expanded paving program, the lakefront development, the City Park extension, the Mississippi River bridge, Canal Street beautification, and a new criminal court building, among other things. He was known as a hard worker, and dedicated his life to his job and to New Orleans politics.

Martin Behrman, born in New York City on October 14, 1864, came to New Orleans with his parents before his first birthday. His father died shortly after the move and his mother supported herself and her son by selling dry goods in the French Market. After her death in 1876 Behrman became a cashier on Canal Street for \$15 a month. He was hired two years later, at the age of fourteen, by a cousin who owned a grocery store in Algiers. He then moved to Algiers, where he would live for the rest of his life, ceased his schooling, and began a series of jobs that brought him into contact with many people and built him a solid foundation of loyal supporters.

After his marriage in 1887 Behrman went into the retail grocery business. He then became a travelling salesman and active in volunteer civic organizations, increasing his circle of friends and acquaintances. He became a deputy assessor in Algiers just a few years later, beginning his long

political career in his mid-twenties, and from that position he stepped up to take over the assessor's duties. He was also clerk for three committees of the City Council: He served as the Algiers member of the Orleans Parish School Board in 1892, and the Algiers delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1898. He won the race for state auditor and established his reputation as a successful candidate and able leader. His party nominated him as their candidate for mayor in 1904.

Behrman's party was known as the Regular Democratic Organization, a group that was extremely powerful in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Their power was based on a pyramidal system of personal bossdoms, beginning with "captains" in each of the city's precincts who were in turn responsible to their ward bosses. The ward bosses met together in the "Council of Seventeen" and dictated party policies. Anyone in disagreement with their policies would find his patronage and support cut off, and in those days an aspiring politician who did not have the party's backing had little or no chance of success. On the other hand, the candidate selected by the party was almost assured of election, so Behrman's nomination in 1904 was tantamount to a mayoral inauguration.

The race between Behrman and Charles F. Buck, the "Home Rule" candidate supported by the Times Picayune, was actually no landslide, but Behrman did win, and after he came into office he was not only energetic and successful in the programs he implemented but also active in increasing the party's power and his own foundation of support. When he ran for reelection in 1908 he was elected almost unanimously: 25,914 votes to 70. In 1912 and 1916 Behrman ran again with little or no opposition.

Some of his accomplishments during his first terms included the initiation of a school building program that would add twenty-four schools to the city's system within Behrman's sixteen consecutive years as mayor; the installation of a municipally operated sewer system and other sanitary measures that helped make 1905 the year of the last major yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans; the rebuilding and expansion of the port after a huge fire in 1904 destroyed many of the docks; an improved drainage program that helped the city expand; and the opening of a new library on St. Charles Avenue built with money from Andrew Carnegie. Behrman favored the idea of confining prostitution to a certain specified area of town, and so was known as an advocate of Storyville, the legalized "red-light district" of New Orleans that existed from 1897 to 1917. It was created during the administration of Mayor Walter C. Flower, but ended during Behrman's reign when the Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels closed it on the grounds that no open prostitution should be allowed within five miles of a naval base. This happened despite a trip by Behrman to Washington to try to convince Daniels that the elimination of Storyville would only spread vice throughout the entire city. His position in this matter earned him the nickname "King of the Tenderloin", which was another name for Storyville.

When the time came for the 1920 mayoral election, Behrman found that, for the first time after sixteen consecutive years in office, he was opposed by a reform-movement candidate who represented a real political threat. There were factions that opposed him because of the position he had taken on Storyville. Others felt that Behrman and his party had become so pow-

erful that the mayor had ruled in essence as a dictator. For a variety of reasons, including Behrman's own belief that perhaps he had just been mayor long enough, A.J. McShane defeated Behrman by seven hundred votes and became the new head of city government. Behrman then "retired" from government and stepped down as leader of his party, now referred to as the "Old Regulars".

Despite his claim of retirement, Behrman remained involved in politics after his defeat, participating in the Constitutional Convention of 1921, and, proving that he still wielded great personal power even without an official title, by throwing his support behind successful candidates for the senate and the governor's office, Joseph E. Ransdell and Henry Fuqua. With these candidates' victories he convinced his party's leaders that he was still a major political force and a popular man, and he earned the Old Regulars' nomination for mayor for a fifth time. He defeated McShane and a third-party candidate, Paul Maloney, in 1924 to shouts of "Papa's back!"

Behrman threw himself into his job with renewed vigor despite his advancing years and failing health. His personal physician, Dr. J.M. Batchelor, was quoted as saying that he warned the mayor repeatedly against his long hours and stressful lifestyle. When Behrman collapsed and died on January 12, 1926, Dr. Batchelor pronounced the cause of death to be chronic myocarditis, a degeneration of the heart muscles caused by overwork. The headlines of an article in the Times-Picayune on January 13, 1926 read: "Mayor, 'Martyr to City', murmurs of New Orleans in last hours before end". It indicated that Behrman spoke out several times from his delirium during the night before he died, and each time he seemed to be carrying on a conversation with another city official about some pressing business matter. He was dedicated to New Orleans until the end.

Social, Cultural or Historical Importance

The Behrman house is typical of those built in Algiers after 1895. Behrman bought the property for \$1000 on August 24, 1896, less than a year after the huge Algiers fire of October 20, 1895, which destroyed nearly two hundred houses in a ten block area around the ferry landing. That area was part of the land purchased by the Company of the Indies in 1724 from Jean Baptiste LeMoyne Bienville, founder of New Orleans. It became the property of the French crown in 1731, when the Company surrendered its charter, and then was sold by the Spanish when they assumed control of the city in 1769. It changed hands four times between 1770 and 1805, when it was purchased on August 5 by Sieur Barthelemy DuVerge for \$18,000. DuVerge built his home on the site of today's Algiers Courthouse in 1812, but sold off small portions of land and eventually subdivided the area in 1842, when it became known as Duvergeville. After the 1850's, the area experienced more and more development, thanks to a large degree to the railroad founded there in 1852, which after the Civil War employed over four thousand people. Greek Revival architecture was abundant before the fire, but the houses built after 1895 were in the more decorative Queen Ann style, and it is these ornamental buildings that give Algiers Point the flavor it has today.

The role that the house at 228 Pelican Street played in Martin Behrman's life was a big one. Since he bought the property in mid-1896 when the property value was \$600, (after having been assessed at \$2000 when owned by

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Hubert Murray in 1895, before the fire destroyed whatever was there), it can be assumed that Behrman built his home soon thereafter, because the 1896 Sanborn map shows the structure in existence and the property value jumped to \$1800 in 1897. Behrman married Julia Collins of Cincinnati, Ohio in 1887, and the couple lived out their lives in the house on Pelican Street. During his long political career Behrman met with many people in the office of his small home. During the night before he died crowds of friends and reporters waited outside the house for news of his condition. After his death the funeral was held in the home, and mourners from Algiers came to pay their last respects. Over four thousand school children lined Pelican Street when Behrman's body was removed, and when it lay in state at City Hall over twenty thousand people passed for a last glimpse. Julia Behrman continued to live in the house for fourteen years after her husband's death, and her funeral was held there in 1940. Behrman's son sold the property to Edward Hebert in 1941, and Hebert's family maintained possession until June 20, 1984, when the present owners purchased the property.

Architectural Significance

The house itself is a rather modest one-story frame structure, with weatherboards covering the sides and drop siding on the facade. It has a front-gabled roof with an "apron" roof covering the front porch. The central doorway and two full-length windows to the left of it open onto the porch. To the right of the doorway is a bay which is covered by its own smaller gabled roof. The bay has a segmentally arched window in the front, with four-over-four light sash and green louvered shutters. Above the window is a straight entablature with a dentil course.

The front door has a leaded-glass decorative window in it, and the transom, which has leaded glass also, is segmentally arched. The door's surround features fluted pilasters topped by brackets that support an entablature with a dentil course. There is an identical door to the right of the main entrance that leads into what was Mayor Behrman's small office in the front of the house. The full-length windows with four-over-four light sash also have the same surrounds. Completing the ornamentation of the front porch is an unusual engaged turned column that sits on a chamfered post. It is to the immediate left of the front door. Two Doric columns support an entablature with a wide frieze topped by a cornice with a dentil course. The columns are connected by an iron handrail.

Ornamentation on the gables features a central segmentally-arched vent with green louvers set into a plain frame. The rest of the gable surface has a sunrise pattern scored into the wood. Carved bargeboards add to the decorative effect, which is even further enhanced by a piece of jigsaw-work suspended from the upper angle of the gable.

One other piece of ornamentation can be found suspended from the cornice on the front right corner of the house. The cornice projects beyond the receding angle of the semi-octagonal bay, and so the decorative frieze of jigsaw-work beneath the corner is especially noticeable.

Martin Behrman's house is typical of the small scale Queen Ann structures built in Algiers after 1895, and remains essentially unaltered. It contributes, along with the others built nearby, to the unique atmosphere of this area.

Architect

None discovered during research.

Staff Recommendation

For designation, based upon the house's connection with an historic personage, Martin Behrman.