

Central Business District Historic District Landmarks Commission

Landmark Designation Report

April 3, 2009



The Masonic Temple Building
333 St. Charles Avenue

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Architectural Rating:	Blue
Construction Date:	1926
Architect:	Sam Stone
Site Description:	Square 222, Lots 1-4
Municipal District:	1
Assessment District:	4
Zoning:	CBD-1
Owner:	St. Charles Hotel, LLC 401 Keyser Avenue Natchitoches, LA 71457
Date Nominated:	December 7, 1999

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural and historical significance. City Ordinance No. 6699 MCS defines a Landmark or Landmark site as: A building(s) (landmark) and/or its lot of record or any part thereof or vacant sites (landmark site), wheresoever located in the Central Business District of the City of New Orleans subject to the jurisdiction of the Central Business District Historic District Landmarks Commission, of particular historic, architectural, or cultural significance, which said landmark and/or landmark site meets at least one of the following criteria: 1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community; or 2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state, or local history; or 3) Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or indigenous materials or craftsmanship; or 4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.

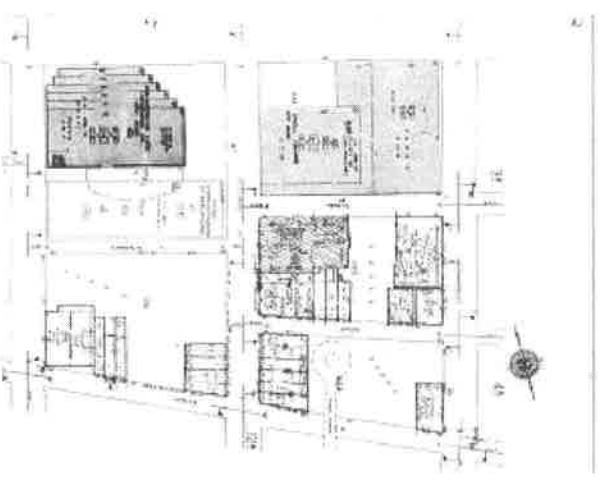
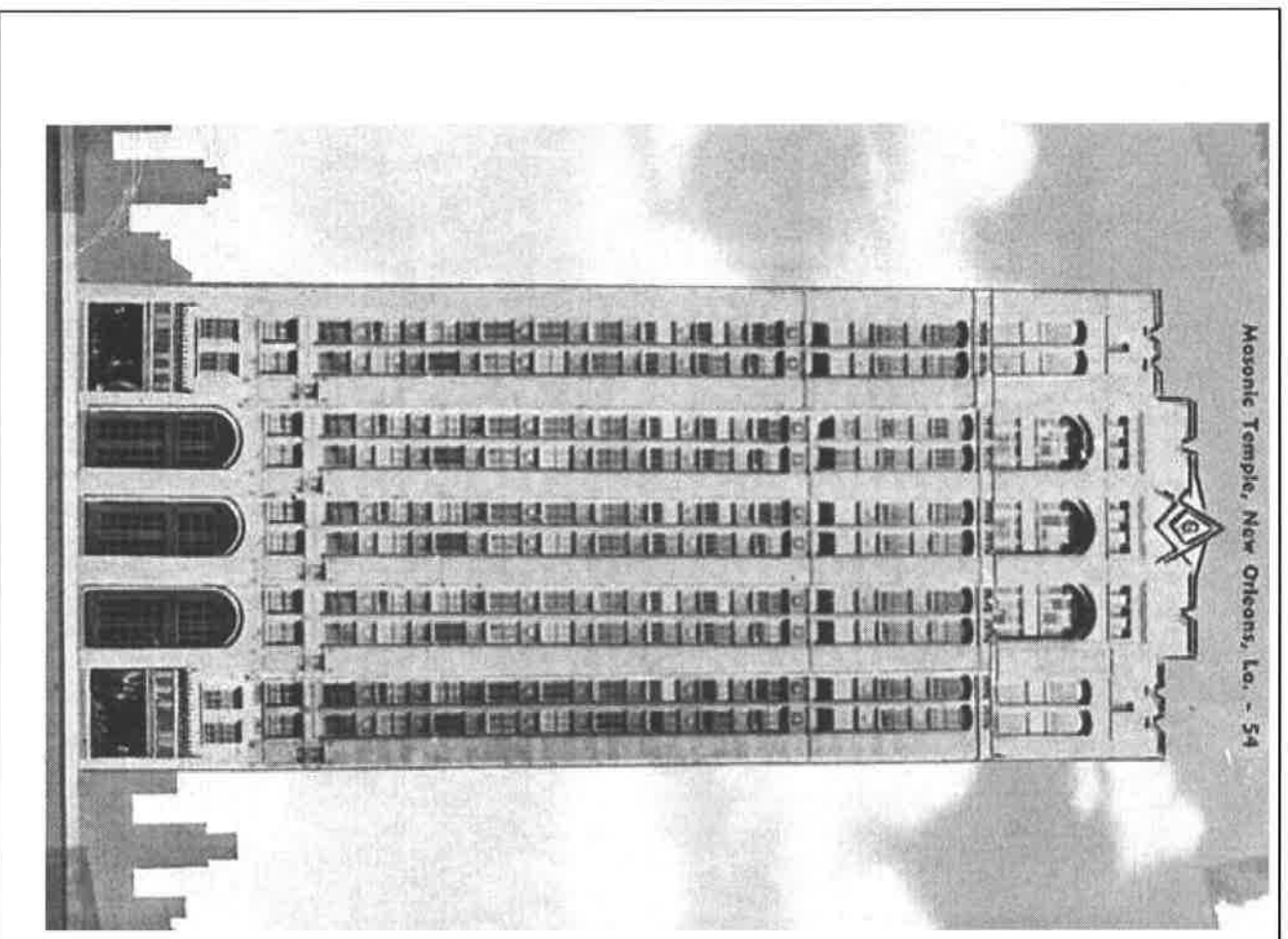


Photo 1: Sanborn map showing the property of the Masonic Temple Building.

History of the Property

The Masonic Temple building constructed in 1926 at 333 St. Charles Avenue is a contributing structure in the Lower Central Business District (CBD) National Register Landmark district that includes over 30 blocks in downtown New Orleans. Contributing elements within the district range in age from 1830 to 1941, and consist primarily of buildings which were erected to house commercial and office uses. The Lower Central Business District occupies a portion of the tract of land which was owned by Don Bertrand Gravier and Madame Marie Gravier in the late eighteenth century. The Gravier property was subdivided into streets and blocks by the Spanish Royal Surveyor Carlos Trudeau in 1788. Development of the Lower Central Business District began in the late eighteenth century, but there are no surviving buildings from that period in the district today. With the entry of Louisiana into the United States in 1812, the flow of Anglo-American immigrants from the rest of the country increased rapidly, with most of these new arrivals moving into the section of the city upriver from the French Quarter. By 1820, according to the architect Benjamin Latrobe, the current Central Business District was the scene of a significant amount of new construction activity, including both residential and commercial buildings. The Lower Central Business District, with its proximity to Canal Street, became the focus of the business and commercial interests of New Orleans, and the overwhelming majority of the buildings built in this section, both before and after the Civil War, were intended for one of those uses. Improvements in building technology after the Civil War led to the construction of larger and taller commercial buildings, many of which replaced smaller antebellum commercial buildings. The first half of the twentieth century saw continued commercial building activity, with the use of steel frame structural systems leading to the erection of the city's first office buildings over 20 stories that were erected for some of the larger banks in the city. The 1920s were the boom years in terms of major high-rise construction in New Orleans, with all of it taking place within the boundaries of the Lower Central Business District. The district is also significant for its unrivaled collection of skyscrapers. The skyscraper is of paramount importance, being one of very few building types one can point to as an American invention. While about half a dozen towns in Louisiana have one, two, or three historic skyscrapers, the Lower Central Business District is the only place where one could say there was a concentration, creating the standard urban American skyline. The district contains numerous examples, ranging from the Chicago School to the Modernistic style. The district's skyscrapers are the state's largest, both in height and footprint. Two even have striking rooftop pavilions visible from across the city, a feature found nowhere else in the state. Finally, the district derives significance from the high percentage of landmark buildings from various periods, many of which are architect designed.

The Masonic Temple was built in 1926 as part of the commercial boom of the Central Business District. The 20 story, 225,000-square-foot building contained eight lodges, or halls, and an auditorium. It was built to replace a former Masonic Lodge built in 1892 and demolished in 1925.



*Picture 2. 1920s Postcard of the
Masonic Temple. Postcard published
by New Orleans News Co., New
Orleans, La.*

Criteria 1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community

The Masonic temple reflects the social history of the organization of the Freemasons, also known as the Knights Templar or Masons, in New Orleans. The all-seeing eye atop the pyramid on the \$1 bill is a Masonic symbol. Some say that some of the great American buildings have Masonic symbols incorporated into their architecture. The Freemasons say they are simply a fraternity that aims to make good men better and to support each other. Ask five different people for the origins of the Freemasons and you may get five different explanations. The most accepted explanation for the brotherhood's birth can be found in the Middle Ages. At that time, Masons were stone workers hired by kings and churches in England, Scotland, and France to build great castles and cathedrals. Two kinds of Masons existed at the time—those who worked with ordinary stone were called “rough masons.” Those who carved more intricate designs into softer stone, called “freestone,” were named “freestone masons” or “free masons” (the two words were later combined to form the title, “Freemason”). The Freemasons enjoyed a monopoly of sorts because of their special skill, and wanted to keep it that way. They established trade guilds to discuss their craft and fair wages. They founded lodges where they would eat and keep their tools. And they developed secret handshakes, code words and other signs to distinguish one another from the rough masons. By the 1700s, the Freemasons had evolved from a trade guild into an organization of men with a very distinct philosophy. They favored religious tolerance over the strict dictates of the Catholic Church, and they enjoyed intellectual discourse with their brothers. Freemasonry was becoming highly fashionable, and its membership was changing. While at first, only “operative,” or working Masons could join the organization, aristocrats and artists, called “speculative” Freemasons, were starting to gain entry. They were turning the Freemasons into something of a gentleman's club. The modern Freemasons were born in 1717, when four Freemason lodges in London, England combined to form the first Grand Lodge, which had authority over all other lodges in that country. Grand Lodges soon followed in Ireland, Scotland and Italy, and by the 1730s they had popped up throughout Europe.

Both the government and the church were suspicious of the organization's secrecy and liberal religious beliefs. In 1737, King Louis XV banned the Freemasons in France. A year later, Pope Clement XII forbade Catholics from becoming Freemasons on penalty of excommunication, and the Portuguese government made Freemasonry punishable by death. With all of the controversy surrounding the Freemasons in Europe, it was no surprise that they would want to seek out friendlier shores. In the 1700s, the Freemasons came to America with other colonists and set up lodges in Boston and Philadelphia (although they remained under the control of an English Provincial Grand Master). In 1731, Benjamin Franklin joined the Philadelphia lodge, and he became its Master three years later. George Washington was initiated as a Freemason in 1752. At the turn of the 20th century, the Freemasons were 860,000 members strong. By the 1930s, there were more than two million Masons in the United States, and their numbers continued to grow. There are currently 1.7 million members, though membership has been declining since 1960.

The history of Freemasonry in New Orleans reflects the history of the city itself. Freemasonry in New Orleans came from two sources, one from the French and the other American. However, originated in England. Freemasonry was introduced in France about 1726

by Englishmen. From France it quickly spread to the French Colonies, especially in the West Indies, and from there to Louisiana. Freemasonry came to colonial America from England and, of course, from colonial America into Louisiana, but it was only after the Louisiana Purchase that Freemasonry began to flourish and become widespread. Freemasons belonged to different lodges. The oldest Lodge in Louisiana is Perfect Union No. 1 in New Orleans. It was originally a French speaking Lodge and was named "Parfaite Union." The records indicate that on April 28, 1793, Laurant Sigur presided over a meeting of fourteen Masons in the city of New Orleans for the purpose of organizing a Masonic Lodge. Many of these Masons had fled from the islands of Santo Domingo and Guadeloupe in the West Indies from whence they were driven by a revolt against the French Government. An organizational meeting was held May 19, 1793, and the officers were elected. Two petitions were received, and at the next meeting, June 9, 1793, the petitioners were initiated. A charter was received from the Grand Lodge of South Carolina, and on March 30, 1794, Jason Laurence constituted the Lodge as Parfaite Union No. 29. After the Louisiana Purchase, a Grand Lodge was formed and a charter was granted to the Lodge. It became La Reguliere Lodge Parfaite Union No. 1; when it changed its work to English it became Perfect Union No. 1. Out of this Lodge Ionic No. 374 and Euclid No. 394 were formed.

In 1794 several Masons held a meeting and formed a Lodge which they called Etoile Polaire (Polar Star.) These Masons applied to the Grand Orient of France for a charter. However, the Grand Orient of France was suffering from the political upheaval occurring in France, and it had suspended its labors. They then applied to La Parfaite Sincerite, the Provincial Lodge at Marseilles, France. A provincial charter or dispensation was granted in 1796. Dominique Mayronne was authorized to deliver it, constitute the new Lodge, and install its officers. On December 27, 1798, Polar Star Lodge was formally constituted. Later, the Grand Orient of France resumed its functions, and acting on the petition it received in 1794, it granted a charter to Polar Star Lodge in 1804. These two Lodges did their work in French, which was a common language and was used in keeping the records of the Lodges. This factor developed fraternal relations and good will. Another factor that forced them to work together was the clerical and civil opposition to Freemasonry, because Masons were looked upon as heretics and devils. When Louisiana was governed by the French or the Spanish, both countries were subordinate to the Pope of Rome, and all of their laws were subservient to, and could not conflict with, the Canon Law of the Roman Hierarchy or the Vatican State. Therefore, under the French or Spanish rule, Freemasonry had to exist underground. In order to have Lodge meetings, the Freemasons went outside the ramparts of the city to meet. Their first meeting place was located on the site now Kerlerec Street, about one block from what was the corner of the old city proper.

Freemasons played a large role in the Louisiana Purchase. In the beginning, Robert Livingston, the first Masonic Grand Master of New York State, was instructed (by President Jefferson) to buy the Floridas and, if possible, the city of New Orleans. Benjamin Franklin, an active Freemason, rendered valuable assistance to Robert Livingston in accomplishing the purchase of Louisiana. Franklin was well liked by the French, particularly the Freemasons. He served as Worshipful Master of a French Lodge. It was Franklin's influence that finally closed the deal whereby the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803. This brought with it freedom of religion and, of course, freedom for the Masons to meet within the city of New Orleans itself. The Canon Law of the Vatican State and the Roman Hierarchy was no longer effective in

Louisiana, and the Grand Lodge was organized on June 20, 1812. In the following years, as the population of New Orleans increased so did the number of Masonic Lodges.

As immigrants came to the city from foreign lands, they brought with them their foreign languages. Many of them were Masons in the old countries and looked for a Masonic Lodge with which to affiliate in Louisiana. As a result, many foreign speaking Lodges were formed. Germania Lodge formerly did its work in the German language but changed to English because of the two World Wars with Germany. Eroile Polaire (Polar Star) and Perservance Lodges did their work in French and eventually changed to English. Cervantes Lodge did its work in the Spanish language and Dante Lodge did its work in the Italian language. Freemasonry members could be found in every profession, trade, or vocation.

The importance of the 333 St. Charles new Masonic Temple to the Masons and New Orleans is reflected in the amount of people and excitement generated by this building. In 1922, the Times Picayune reported that there was a three day long Statewide Masonic meeting attended by 300 attendees at which plans were pushed to build this new twenty-story Masonic Temple, along with a Louisiana Masonic widows and orphans home. The building was to be the home of the Masons and a center for their faith and humanitarian civic activities. On February 1, 1926, the Times Picayune reported that throngs of people gathered in front of the new Masonic Temple for the cornerstone ceremony. The ceremony was preceded by the largest public appearance of New Orleans Masons. Approximately 7000 Master Masons from the forty-four lodges of the city marched in a procession. The Times Picayune reported that the Grand Master Conner made various addresses at the ceremony encouraging a spirit of tolerance and condemnation of bigotry and prejudice.

The 20-story, 246 feet (75 m)-tall skyscraper remained home to the Masons until it was sold in 1992 and redeveloped as Hotel Monaco until Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Hotel Monaco did not reopen after Katrina. The hotel reopened in 2007 as a luxury Hilton Hotel.

Criteria 3. Embodiment distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or indigenous materials or craftsmanship

The building was constructed in 1926 of steel framing with stone cladding and ornament. The building sits at the corner of St. Charles Avenue and Perdido Street and occupies nearly a quarter of the square. The main, corner section of the building is five bays wide by five bays deep. The rear section is 15 stories tall and is four bays deep. The main entrance on St. Charles is recessed behind three round arches highlighted with an ornate pattern carved in the stone. The sign carved above the front entrance reads “Created By the Grand Lodge of Louisiana” (see photo 3). The building is highly decorative with stone carvings of medallions between the floors, above and below the windows (see details of carvings in photos 3-4). The upper windows are double hung six over six wood windows. The architecture, exquisite woodwork and other design detail from the artisans of the 1920’s is evident throughout the building and highlighted by the original chandeliers at the main entrance, original marble floors and walls, and the elaborate, hand-crafted, tile ceiling in the Grand Entry Hall.



Picture 3. Main Entrance of the Masonic Temple.



Picture 4: Details of ornate stone carving on the elevations of the building.

Criteria 4: Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.

Architect Sam Stone of the Stone Brothers firm designed the Masonic Temple. Stone Brothers Architects was a prominent firm in New Orleans and Sam Stone was well known for his technical expertise and accomplishments. Some of his other notable works include the Orpheum Theater, the Maritime (Hennen) Building (the first skyscraper in New Orleans), the Maison Blanche Building, the Sea Lion Pool of the Audubon Zoo, the natatorium and bath houses of Audubon Park (demolished), the Civic Theater, the renovation of the French Market, the basement of the St. Charles Hotel (the first basement in New Orleans), and many other structures that have since been demolished.

Stone's career began in the 1890s with the architectural firm of Thomas Sully. Upon Sully's death, Sam Stone and Co. came into being. He was later joined by his sons, and became Stone Brothers. As one of the premier architects in the city at the time he is well regarded, "there were surely none who could rival Stone's impact on the public consciousness of this city." (New Orleans Magazine, January 1973, "New Orleans' Edwardian Stone Age") In addition to his architectural career, Stone was very active in the political life of New Orleans - he was appointed Commissioner of Public Property and then Commissioner of Public Safety; he was president of the State Board of Architectural Examiners, and was a member of the Board of Appeals of the Building Code. He was also a very prominent Mason, President of the Audubon Park Commission and one of the founders of Audubon Zoo. The Masonic Temple is significant as it is the work of the noted master architect Sam Stone.

Staff Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Masonic Building be designated as a landmark as it fulfills three of the four criteria required to establish significance. The complex is significant as it exemplifies the broad cultural and social history of New Orleans through the history of the Freemasons, embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction or indigenous materials or craftsmanship as one of the early ornate stone skyscrapers of the Central Business District, and is representative of the notable work of a master architect Sam Stone whose individual ability has been recognized.

Report prepared by:

Nicole Hernandez

Architectural Historian

Historic District Landmarks Commission

1340 Poydras Street, Suite 1152

New Orleans, LA 70112

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