

THE AMERICAN CAN COMPANY FACTORY COMPLEX

602 N. Cortez

Landmark Report

January 13, 1998

Architectural Rating: Blue

Date of Construction: 1906 - 1929

Architect: Favrot and Livaudais

Site Description:

Square Number: 484, 485, 499

Zoning: Light Industrial

Municipal District: Second

Owners: American National Can Company

8770 West Bryn Mawr Ave.

Chicago, IL 60631-3504

Nomination Information:

Date Nominated: 2/13/96

Recommended by: Jillian Shingledecker, Bayou St. John Neighborhood Association

Nominated by: Dr. John Ernst

Secoded by: Mrs. Robertson and Mr. Lawrence

The nomination of the American Can Company factory buildings was made for the purpose of investigating the architectural and/or cultural, political, economic and social significance of the complex. Each of the four criteria used for determining landmark qualification, as outlined in City Council Ordinance No. 5992 MCS, will be examined on an individual basis in order to produce a body of information upon which a final decision whether or not to designate the building can be made.

Architectural Significance

The American Can Company is a large brick, frame and concrete industrial complex, located on a railway corridor between two historic New Orleans residential areas, Mid City/City Park and Bayou St. John. The six major historic buildings in the complex date from 1906 to 1929, and were designed by the prominent firm of Favrot and Livaudais. The buildings range in height from two to five stories. The American Can buildings represent possibly the only catalogue of progressive factory architecture on one site in the city. Alterations consist mainly of small additions and severe damage to the 1906 section of the facility and to the train shed in a December, 1989 fire. There are also later buildings on the site that do not qualify as historic. (Please refer to site map.)

The present buildings are centered around an early railroad spur which switches off the main line and enters the complex at an angle. It was from this spur that tin was unloaded for use in the factory. Originally the trains were unloaded and loaded on the Orleans Avenue side of the three original Toulouse Street buildings. As new buildings were added, each was constructed to front on the Orleans Avenue side, permitting trains to unload between the buildings. This area between the buildings was formed into a train shed which was covered by a 1920s skylighted roof structure, similar to that of passenger train stations. It has two rows of columns, a steel truss roof, and a ventilating monitor along each side. Unfortunately, roughly half of the train shed was lost in the previously mentioned December, 1989 fire. However, the section that remains is in its original form. Having such an enclosed train shed was unusual for an early twentieth century American factory complex. The normal arrangement was for the track to run by the side of the building under an open canopy. A conventional railroad canopy of this kind can be seen on the east elevation of the 1913 portion of the building.

Although the complex was built in stages, it essentially breaks down into two periods of construction:

1. The sections dating from 1906, c.1907 and 1913 - The factory's first three buildings were constructed along Toulouse Street. These are heavy wood frame structures with brick exterior walls rising to a parapet. Exterior bays are defined by brick piers which protrude slightly above the parapet. Most of the openings take the form of double sash windows set beneath brick segmental arches.

The first building constructed in 1906, a three story structure identified as Building 2 and having 35,000 square feet, was unfortunately virtually destroyed in the 1989 fire. It still retains its two bay stair tower, the ground floor facade of the southern (Toulouse Street) elevation (twelve bays wide), as well as portions of its second floor along the southern and western perimeter.

The 35,781 square foot building Number 1 was built in 1908 and luckily sustained only minor damage from the fire. The design of this building closely reflects that of the earlier building (#2). It is eleven bays wide. The third floor of this three-story wood and masonry structure has a distinctive roof monitor running along its center, allowing natural light into the interior.

The third building, Building 3 (c. 1907), with 10,223 square feet, located along Toulouse Street at the corner of North Cortez, was the main entryway, office area, and first floor dressing room for the workers. It is three bays wide on the Toulouse Street facade, and five bays deep on the N. Cortez Street side, with a separate, diagonal entrance bay at the corner. Unique to this building is its concrete cast-in-place first and second floors with wood columns above and wood roof decking. Its walls are brick and several of its street side windows are of cypress.

The fourth building constructed on the site was the 56,980 square foot Building 4. A wood and masonry building erected in 1913, it is nine bays deep on the western facade and eight bays wide on the Toulouse and Orleans Ave. facades. Its floors are tongue and groove maple over solid heart pine joists resting on heart pine beams and columns. Window sashes and frames are cypress. In 1929, this three-story 1913 portion received a fourth story. A metal bridge at the second floor of the Toulouse Street facade connects this building with Building 1. There is also a metal train canopy on the east elevation.

2. The sections dating from 1923 and 1929 - The 1920s buildings are reinforced, cast-in-place concrete construction and feature four light courts. The exterior bays of brick and glass are separated by structural concrete piers that rise to a simple cornice. Above the cornice level is a brick and concrete parapet featuring panels over the piers and lozenge shaped ornamentation. Most of the bays have bands of sash mounted windows that help convey the industrial character of the structures. These large expanses of glass, generally four sashes of 6/6 double-hung per opening, allow abundant natural light to enter deep into the buildings. There is a section of brick infill below the sill level of the windows.

In 1923, the first "modern" four story factory building, Building 5, was constructed. It is connected to Building 4 by a side ell. (As noted earlier, the fourth story of Building 4 was added after the construction of this building.) This building is ten bays wide and faces Orleans Avenue. On the north elevation the two central bays project forward, marking its center and forming a tower-like element, which has a taller, more ornamented parapet and smaller windows. The ground floor also has smaller windows and has heavier massing. No doubt the construction of Building 5 led to the roofing of the train shed.

In 1929, Building 6 was erected, a very similar concrete and glass structure but with five stories. It is somewhat cross-shaped and is connected to Building 5 between the two light courts. An adjoining masonry structure, detailed to match the building, also connected it to Building 2. This structure appears to remain intact, even though the adjoining building wall is mostly gone. Building 6 faces N. Cortez Street and is seven bays wide, with a three bay projecting section between the third and fourth bay. The center bay of this projection has a higher parapet. A dependency from the 1930s is between this building and N. Cortez Street.

In addition to the main buildings, there are some historic dependencies and attachments that were added over the years. The complex also features a historic connecting bridge between the 1908 building and the 1913 building. (Another of these bridges, between the 1906 and 1923 buildings, was lost in the fire.)

The buildings have suffered from minor alterations, including a small one-story, metal-sided 1963 wing on the north side, and modern truck bays added to both the south and northeastern sides of the complex. However, these changes do not threaten the integrity of the complex, particularly given its overall size and scope. The building severely damaged in the 1989 fire accounted for only 11% of the total square footage, and fortunately, half of the train shed survives. The buildings strongly retain their industrial character and would be easily recognizable if their early twentieth century workers were to view them today.

Economic, Social, and Cultural Significance

The American Can Company Factory is economically and socially significant for its important role in the industrial development of New Orleans. Historically it was one of the few large factories in New Orleans. In terms of employment, it was second only to Lane Cotton Mills. As New Orleans' economy was traditionally based on the port and import/export trade, it never really developed as a manufacturing center. Thus the few historic, truly industrial buildings remaining are rare, making their significance even greater.

The American Can Company was organized in 1901 and continued in business until 1986, when they were absorbed by the National Can Company, now d/b/a American National Can Company. They began construction on the New Orleans plant in 1906. An article in the *New Orleans Item* on May 17, 1906 reported that Cook and Laurie, building contractors, had been awarded the contract for the erection of the "big new plant." It noted that the pilings and foundation had already been put in by the Glover firm of New Orleans. An estimated completion date for the plant was given as November 1, 1906. The news release also noted that, "Aside from a very small plant at Atlanta (Georgia), this will be the first Southern plant put up by the big company." The new building was to manufacture cans for "coffee, lard, baking powder, oil, molasses, etc. In fact, they will manufacture a full line of cans." As the factory proved successful, this list grew to include containers for meats, beer, carbonated beverages, salad oils, paints and motor oil. According to a press release issued by the company on the occasion of the factory's fiftieth birthday, it began with only forty-six employees and produced ten million cans in its first year.

In a full-page story in the *Times-Picayune* on June 24, 1917, the factory was described as "the largest can maker in the South" and one of the largest in a "vast system with factories throughout the United States, Canada and Hawaii." By that date the work force had expanded from the original forty-six employees to over 500. From an annual output of ten million cans in 1906, the plant was now shipping that many alone to the adjoining state of Mississippi and in addition, was supplying 23 million cans annually to Texas, 20 million cans annually to Louisiana, and an unspecified but large number to western Alabama as well. The American Can Company's growth was also obvious from the expansion the facility experienced. On the eve of World War I the facility had about 158,000 square feet; by the end of the 1920s it had about 484,000 square feet.

Due to the size and longevity of this particular industrial entity, one must also consider the important effect it had over the years on the New Orleans economy. Employees here manufactured cans and packaging for just over eighty years, until the factory was closed in May of 1988. At its maximum capacity, American Can employed 1,500 workers. But it ultimately fell victim to changing economic times with the regionalization of manufacturing and the closure of four major breweries in the area. The manufacturing operations were relocated to other parts of the country when the plant was closed, and it has remained vacant ever since.

Historic Personages:

none

Architect:

Favrot and Livaudais was a prominent architectural firm active in New Orleans from 1895 to 1934. One of the most important firms of their day, it was headed by Charles A. Favrot (1866-1939) and Louis A. Livaudais (died 1932). Charles Favrot was born in West Baton Rouge parish and graduated in engineering from Louisiana State University in 1884. After a few years of architectural training in the office of James Freret, Favrot took a postgraduate course in architecture at Cornell University. Upon his return to New Orleans in 1890, he opened an office

with S. R. Duvall, with whom he worked for three years. In 1891, he married Miss Beatrice Freret. In 1895 he entered into a partnership with Louis Livaudais, a successful practice that continued until Mr. Livaudais' death in 1932. Mr. Favrot also served as Chairman of the City Planning and Zoning Commission for several years.

Well known designers, some of Favrot and Livaudais' more famous extant projects are the Mayer Israel & Co. Store at 714 Canal (1910), the former New Orleans Cotton Exchange building at 237 Carondelet (1920), Hibernia Bank at 301 Carondelet (1921), the Marks Isaacs residence, now the Latter Memorial Library at 5120 St. Charles Ave. (1907), and the great Richardsonian Romanesque house for W. P. Brown at 4717 St. Charles Avenue (1904). They also designed the Municipal Auditorium in 1930. Their design of the American Can Company buildings serves to further demonstrate the wide range of quality architectural design this firm was capable of, from high style residences, to major commercial buildings, to industrial complexes.

Conclusion:

Unlike many other areas of the country, extant historic industrial complexes in New Orleans are rare. The American Can Company buildings survive basically intact as an architectural reminder of an earlier period of industrial development. The economic and social importance that this complex had to the city cannot be overlooked. The economic vitality that it contributed to the area, supplying goods to the entire southeastern United States and ranking as New Orleans' second largest industrial employer, is well represented. Its design by a major architectural firm, Favrot and Livaudais, marked its significance as an industrial icon of the time, and serves now to underscore its architectural importance. In summation, the American Can Company buildings are highly deserving of local landmark designation.

Endnotes

Artists' File of Historic New Orleans Collection:

Biographical Dictionary of American Architects, Withey, 1956
History of New Orleans, Vol. II, Kendall, p. 790.

"Big Can Factory to be Erected" - *New Orleans Item*, May 17, 1906, p. 9, col. 5

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for American Can Company (draft of second version) - Donna Fricker, State Historic Preservation Office, Division of Historic Preservation, National Register Section

New Orleans Architecture, Vol. II: The American Sector, The Friends of the Cabildo, Inc., 1972.

New Orleans Architecture, Vol. VII: Jefferson City, The Friends of the Cabildo, Inc., 1989.

Sanborn Map, 1908

Staff Report, Zoning Docket 23/90 - City Planning Commission, Semi-Monthly Zoning Meeting,
May 8, 1990

“The American Can Company, Executive Summary,” (including site plan) - John Schackai,
A.I.A.

Historic photographs courtesy of Historic New Orleans Collection

Favrot and Livaudais plans courtesy of the Mathes Group